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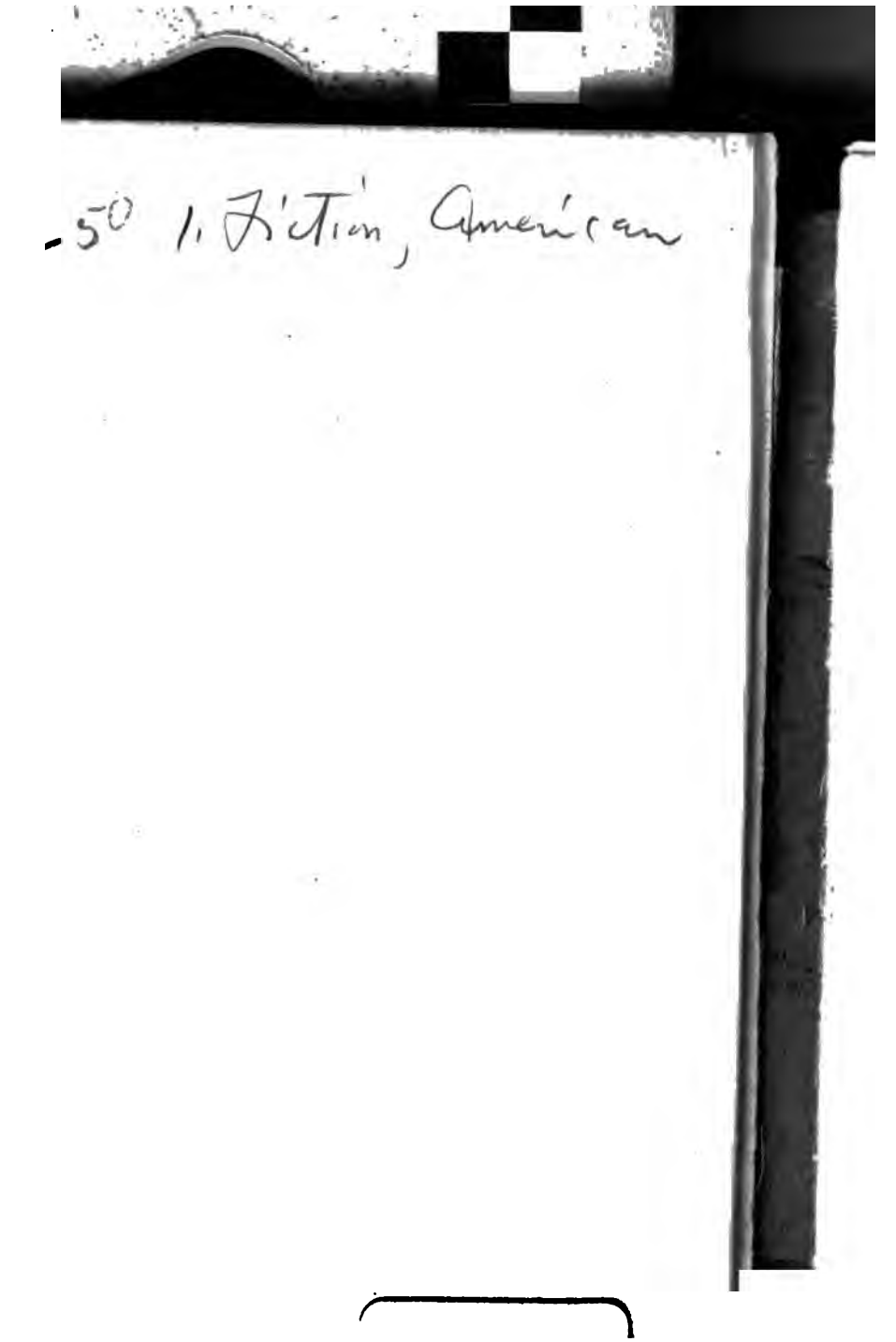
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THE
CASTLE BUILDERS

BY

CHARLES CLARK MUNN

ILLUSTRATED BY

FRANK T. MERRILL

BOSTON

LOTHROP, LEE & SHEPARD CO.

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THE CASTLE BUILDERS

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PREFACE

A few men awe us by their dauntless courage, far vision, primal force, and power of leadership. Men "who blaze their way where never highway ran." Many more charm us by wit, humor, and ability to discover and express the droll side of ordinary events; while still more interest us by simple kindness and everyday honesty. But among all the types I have met and studied, none appeals to me more forcibly than the genial optimist, the man with philosophy enough to see the silver lining back of all clouds, to point it out to us, and convince us that Rainbowville is still on the map of our lives. It is for this reason that I have selected "Uncle Asa" Webster as the leading character in this book, and used a pathetic experience in his life as the basis of the story. I have known him many years, and his unfailing ability to hear larks singing, even in overcast skies, has made him well beloved by all who are favored with his acquaintance. And inasmuch as he has brought a ray of sunshine to me in many a pessimistic mood, so do I hope he may to my readers.

CHARLES CLARK MUNN.

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THE CASTLE BUILDERS

CHAPTER I

FOR four hours Stacy Whipple had floundered and fought his way through the Mohawk-briared morass of Bear Hole Swamp, ostensibly in pursuit of trout, in reality prospecting for a suitable site for a dam and reservoir to supply electric power to Barre, a small coast city fourteen miles away beyond a low range of mountains. He had lost his package of lunch early that June day, ruined his supply of cigars and matches by a souse into the stream from a moss-coated log, and lost his temper many times over. And then with a vague idea that this swamp must be about all there was of Oakdale, he finally reached hard soil once more, and a faintly defined path downward and alongside a cascading stream overhung by pines. Here the path, velvety from many years' deposit of needles, soon soothed his ruffled temper. A quarter-mile of such consolation disclosed an opening just ahead between abutting hills, and here he halted; for up from this and mingling with the soft sighing of the

green canopy above him came the faint, metallic "plink plink" of some musical instrument. So weird and witching was it — almost uncanny — that he stood stock-still, even forgetting his half-starved condition for a moment. Then, as the murmur of the pines died away, the ghostly melody resolved itself into the old familiar plantation tune of "Don't You Hear Dem Bells A-Ringing?"

For fully five minutes Stacy stood almost breathless to catch this strangely sweet old-time melody, faint in the distance, then step by step crept onward. Ten, twenty, thirty rods, and he halted again, for just ahead in the open sat a girl, leaning against the trunk of a monster pine, and holding in her lap an auto-harp.

A simply-made, well-fitting calico dress enclosed her daintily rounded form, two low tan shoes pointed their toes upward, a broad sun-hat lay beside her; her face, sweet, sun-tanned, yet dreamy from soul-absorption in her music, was bent over her harp, while two small hands swept back and forth across its strings. So charming was this picture that Stacy forgot the rudeness of his act and watched it for a long minute of almost trance. Then he strode forward out of the thicket with a "Beg pardon, don't be scared," to save her from fright.

His effort failed, however, for with a scream that was almost of fear, she tossed the harp aside, sprang up, bounded a rod away, then turned and faced him.

"Don't be frightened, please," he added assuringly, and bowing now, as he raised his cap. "I am only a harmless fisherman just escaped from the swamp back there, and nearly starved." Then glancing towards the roof of an old brown house barely visible below them, he continued, "Do you think I can buy something to eat at your home, as I suppose it is, down there?"

"I g-guess so," she stammered, still watching him with wide-open, fathomless eyes. And now as his mud-splashed, scratched, yet open and smiling face reassured her, a smile came to hers.

"That is my home, sir," she continued with dignity now, "and I presume mother will find something for you."

And now, as man and maid stood watching one another, Stacy smiling genially as was his wont, she still curious, a smile spread over her round, piquant face.

"But you did give me an awful fright," she said.

"I know it," he returned humbly now, "but I didn't mean to. I *had* to come out of the woods, you see."

And so these two, Miss Hazel Webster, a keen-

witted, sweetly simple country girl aged twenty-one, and Stacy Whipple, a polished city-bred man of thirty, first met. And neither realized how the shuttle of fate and fortune was destined to weave into their lives the warp and woof of human happiness and human suffering.

Just then, however, food was of more account than even the fairest of rustic maids to Stacy, so with another bow and tip of cap to this one, he turned and left her. A few rods down the open pasture and a tall, bent old man, wielding a hoe in a potato field beside it, caught his eye. To him, as the likeliest one to obtain food from, Stacy now went.

"Good morning, sir," he said with his usual form of address, whatever the time of day. "I am a half-starved man just escaped from an all-day scramble through Bear Hole Swamp," he added, as the farmer looked up, "and will pay well for something to eat. Can you do anything for me?"

"Wal, ye look it," answered Uncle Asa, smiling at him with keen, kindly blue eyes. "B'ar Hole's a tough un to tackle, speshly by a city feller, ez I see you be. I guess we kin fix ye up suthin'," he continued, now leading the way toward the house. "Come along, 'n' I'll see what Martha kin do."

"My name's Whipple, Stacy Whipple from Al-

bion," Stacy continued, feeling that some introduction of himself was next in order, as they started on. "I came up to spend a week brook-trout fishing, and the landlord of your hotel set me at it this morning and into the worst swamp that ever was."

"'N' mine's Webster, Asa Webster," he responded, now chuckling, "'n' that's Sam all over. He allus plays B'ar Hole off on every strange fisherman that comes here, 'n' gits the laugh on 'em." Then Uncle Asa laughed himself.

"Well, he caught me," rejoined Stacy ruefully. "I am it, I guess, for a tenderfoot."

"Yaas, I guess ye kin figger it that way," drawled Uncle Asa, "'n' Sam allus works it on newcomers arter trout. Tells 'em B'ar Hole brook's full on 'em, 'n' in they go. You ain't the fust un that's fetched out here perty much bushed. You kin bet Sam's ben laughin' all day thinkin' 'bout ye. Did ye ketch any, though?" he queried as they neared the house.

"I got quite a number in the morning," responded Stacy, opening his basket eagerly, as all fishermen will. "Then after an hour the swamp got so bad I gave up fishing."

"Wal, ye done well," asserted Uncle Asa with an accent of praise and peep into the basket. "Better'n most do. One o' yours 'll weigh 'most a

pound. Jist you keep still 'bout the swamp when you git back, 'n' you'll kinder spile Sam's laugh at ye. He's got it waitin' fer ye, sure's a gun."

Then this lovable old Good Samaritan led the mud-soiled Stacy into a back kitchen, where there was a stone sink and faucet for running water, brought a cake of toilet soap and clean towel, and returned to the next or main kitchen of this antique abode.

"Martha," he said pleasantly (and overheard by Stacy), "I've fetched a man in who's 'most starved. What kin ye do for him?"

"Why, I kin git him some bread 'n' butter, I s'pose," came the accidental answer: "thar ain't no cold meat in the house."

"Ye might fry him a slice o' ham, Martha," returned Uncle Asa in soothing tone. "'n' I'll dress him a few o' his trout; he's perty hungry."

"Me fry trout this hot afternoon? Guess not!" growled Martha.

"But ye might," persisted Uncle Asa soothingly. "He seems a pleasant sort o' feller. A stranger who come here a fishin'. Don't be fretty, Martha. I'll start the fire. Whar's Hazel?"

"Whar she allus is when wanted," came the sharp rejoinder. "A-plinkin' on that new contrap-

tion you bought her, in some shady spot, 'n' leavin' me to do the work."

And that brief yet quite pertinent dialogue now disclosed the domestic status of this family to Stacy as fully as an hour's history of it could have done.

He also soon caught sight of a fairly comely woman of middle age and red hair through an open window of the main kitchen as he emerged from the back one, saw the girl he had come upon so suddenly now enter the house, and then he retreated to the shade of a maple beneath which stood a grindstone, to be out of hearing of any further domestic exchanges.

"Can't be she's her mother," he muttered, seating himself here. "It doesn't seem possible." And then after half an hour and more of surmising upon the mutual relationship of these three people, he was invited into the living room of "Uncle Asa," so known all over the town of Oakdale. Here, also, another surprise awaited him in the person of the aforesaid Hazel, now dressed in white, who greeted him with quiet, smiling dignity, and served him a meal of ham and eggs, fried trout, and coffee, with a dish of field strawberries; all of which proved a repast relished as never one before in his life ever had been. No awkward diffidence on her

part, just an easy, pleasant urbanity and attention to his wants, a few polite inquiries as to his experiences that day in the swamp, and for the rest he was left to do most of the talking. He had expected her to be a shy and quite rural and rustic maid, but she proved herself a young lady of speech, manners, and refinement quite above and beyond her surroundings. The quaint room with its worn rag-carpet, chintz-covered settle, and open fireplace added charm. He noticed the ancient brass fire dogs, and also a bunch of freshly picked lilacs in a pitcher minus the handle on the table set with very old blue china, while through the open windows came the sweet fragrance of apple blossoms. All in all, a meal, a hostess, and a service quite charming and unexpected.

And now a peculiar dilemma faced Stacy. To ask this dignified young lady how much he owed for the meal, he dare not, nor even to tender her any payment. To leave such under his plate or go out to the field and offer it to Uncle Asa seemed equally out of place, and how to square himself for his entertainment was a problem. In the end, and after profuse thanks to the girl, or rather young lady, whom he now addressed as Miss Webster, he bethought himself of the elder and sour-spoken Martha, stepped into her lair — the kitchen — and

with a "Please accept this, madam, with many thanks for your kindness," handed her a dollar and made his exit. Outside, he glanced around the premises once more, saw how old and worn-out they were: house moss-coated from age, barn propped up by timbers, and in every respect a home more ancient than Uncle Asa himself, whom he now saw back in his field, and once more Stacy sought him before departing.

"Wal, did ye make out to git enough to eat?" asked Uncle Asa, smiling in a genial way.

"I had the meal of my life," returned Stacy earnestly, "and one I'll never forget, thanks to you all."

"Ye war middlin' hungry, I cal'late," answered Uncle Asa, "'n' it's good appetite ez makes good vittles. Only ye don't want to let on to Sam 'bout the swamp," he added benignly. "Sam's a dabster fer riggin' a body if he gets the chance. Now thar's 'bout a dozen good trout left in your basket; I fixed 'em up with grass, 'n' you jist tell Sam B'ar Hole's all right, best trout brook ye ever saw, 'n' show them trout, 'n' you'll shet him up."

"I will, and gladly," returned Stacy. "And now I've another favor to ask. I'm here for a few days' fishing. You must know all the good brooks hereabouts, and now can't I induce you to

go with me to-morrow to show the way? I'll pay you anything you'll accept for your time."

"Wal, I might," responded Uncle Asa, again smiling; "jist you come 'round here arly to-morrow 'n' we'll see what we kin find. I hain't ben troutin' myself fer quite a spell 'n' I'd like a day off." Then, as if his hoeing must now be finished, he speedily turned to it again.

Stacy also recognizing this, and glancing at the lowering sun, bade him good-bye and betook himself away down the maple-shaded lane, at the upper end of which stood this ancient abode. At its foot and where it joined the main road, he halted and looked back.

"Nice old man," he said to himself aloud, "and one of Nature's noblemen. I'd like to know him better. Likewise the girl. But that old woman was the limit! She snatched that dollar as a hen would a kernel of corn. I'll bet the girl isn't her daughter, though." And then Stacy Whipple, erstwhile civil engineer, later mine prospector in the Far West, now youngest partner in a firm able to carry out a million-dollar contract without uneasiness, and doing business in a distant city, turned away whistling. Nothing disturbed him much or excited him much. He had traveled widely and observingly. Had met and studied men of all sorts

and occupations. Knew the world as it is and its people, their vices and virtues, foibles and follies, and now at thirty was unscathed by any serious love affair, untainted by the underworld he had crossed and recrossed many times, a hater of shams, a lover of Nature, and a confirmed cynic. He was, however, in the main a genial good fellow, generous to a fault, satisfied to remain a bachelor and make his home with a most excellent aunt whose hobby was house-pets and money invested in the firm of Bemis, Colby, and Company, of which Stacy was junior partner. He also had still another and even more interesting peculiarity, and that was air-castle building. No matter where he was or what interested him, the moment he had time for thought, presto, up sprang one of those fantastic palaces, a Spanish chateau! He was perpetually erecting them in the path of his own future fortunes, or of others as well. They tinged his day dreams, and often those by night, and once begun, hours were consumed in their completion. His own fate and future as well as others' prospects were thus often outlined by the same magic wand. He plotted and planned what to do himself and considered the future of others as freely, and for the same purpose, — merely an occupation of mind. And these day-dream castles, these always quite perfect plans and

possibilities, never failed to be luxurious, charming, grand, and beautiful in form, color, and construction. And best of all, the soul-life of the people who dwelt in them was as much so. A quite idyllic gathering of the best and noblest of men and women as companions for his future. In a way, his nature was a contradiction, and he might fairly be called a cynical optimist.

Only one minor love episode had ever ruffled the smooth current of his life, a rather hectic and lurid one with a fair Spanish lady of dreamy eyes who was two years his senior in age, and ten in love experience. This " fool illusion," as he afterwards called it, lasted just eight months; its awakening was to find " La Rosa Carmen " was not only leading him a Cupid's dance, but at the same time infatuating a music teacher who spent most of his earnings on her and let his wife and two children go with little more than food and shelter. Stacy, more worldly-wise than most men, did not even hint a reproach — just packed his grip and hied himself away to the West without even a farewell note to his charmer. Neither did it take him long to recover from this episode, for he was one to whom heart troubles so far had not been serious matters. He had come up to this sequestered byway town, located at the confluence of two streams, shut in be-

tween ranges of mountains and four miles from the ocean — or at the end of an inlet called Elbow Creek — and ten miles from the nearest railroad station, as stated, to prospect for an available location for an electric light and power plant for the seaport of Barre. No hint of this must escape him until he had made due selection and report, also secured options; else the price of swamp lands would soar in Oakdale. This was his real mission here, to fish was his excuse for it; and now, well away from Uncle Asa's home, with two hours more of daylight, he turned from the main road, crossed an upward slope of bush-grown pasture, and ascended to the top of a high hill to survey Oakdale. Back of this lay the pathless tangle of swamp he had crossed that day; at its foot and midway of a pocket between low hills, the ancient gambrel-roofed abode of Uncle Asa; to the westward, the widely scattered farmhouses of this hill-enclosed town, with a group of them and two churches midway of the valley, while far to southward lay the bordering ocean, white-capped and sparkling. The widely-apart houses were mostly brown and ancient like the one nearest him, patches of woods predominated over open fields, and the entire impress of this hamlet was very rural, quite picturesque, and entirely peaceful. Life here was self-evidently akin

to the landscape, simple, quiet, and without excitement or current. And just now, viewing this and realizing this, his mission here and its probable outcome recurred to him. Also how, by the magic of a power he was to evoke from one of these streams, factories would arise, new people — workers in these — crowd themselves into this quiet hamlet, a trolley line supplant the old-fashioned stage that brought him, and the great outside world come and take slow but sure possession.

"It's a shame to spoil this sequestered nook," he said to himself as if prophesying, "but it can't be helped. It's the march of progress, the tide of change and innovation." Then glancing at the sun, now glowing blood-red through the green trees of a low mountain top, he made his way down into the valley.

And just previous to this occurred another incident of this narrative which concerns the relations of Miss Hazel Webster and her step-mother Martha who, as the townsfolk all said, were "allus at swords' points," as might be expected. Hazel had witnessed through the open kitchen door the tender of money by Stacy in payment for his meal, had seen her mother snatch it eagerly and thrust it into her apron pocket, and her less sordid soul revolted at once.

" Mother," she said, entering the kitchen, her face aflame, as soon as Stacy was well away, " you had no right to take a dollar from that man for his dinner and I am ashamed for you. He must think us very mean and grasping."

" I'll take what's given me," returned her mother sharply, " 'n' I dunno's it's any o' your business, either."

" It's mine as much as yours," answered Hazel with rising wrath, " and he will have good reason to think us mean, I say."

" Wal, say it all you want to," snarled Martha, turning away, " 'n' if ye don't like my way o' doin' things ye ain't 'bleeged to stay here, I s'pose ye know."

And poor Hazel, to whom the coming of this woman to replace her own mother nine years before had been gall and bitterness, took herself away for the girlish consolation of tears.

Later, when he came for his two milk pails, she followed her father to where the cows awaited his attention.

" Father," she said, coming to the point at once, with eyes still red, " I can't stand mother's ways any longer. Please, may I go away and teach school in Barre when September comes? There is a girl, Jennie Oaks — you know her — she was in

school with me there, and she has promised to get me a place. May I go, father?"

"Oh, don't ye mind Martha, little girl," he answered tenderly. "She's fretty, 'n' her ways ain't our ways. Kinder bossy, I know, but she means well, I cal'late. What's up now, girlie?" And he smiled at Hazel in his usual benign way.

And Hazel, with more spirit than he, yet as tender-hearted, told him all that had happened.

"Wal, wal, don't ye mind, girlie, don't ye mind," he assured her soothingly. "We must put up with Martha's ways, you 'n' I. But I can't spare ye, nohow. I — I meant well bringin' Martha here," he added after a pause, "better'n it's turned out, mebbe, but I can't let ye go. I'd gin the house up to her fust, 'n' go with ye — som'ers.

"Thar's 'nother thing I might ez well tell ye, Hazel," he continued more tenderly, "'n' mebbe it'll sorter rekonsile ye to matters ez they be. I've fixed my will so you'll git everything I kin give ye 'cordin' to law when I go, 'n' that mine stock's in your name. When I'm through, you'll come perty near bein' able to order her to git out if ye feel like it. 'N'— wal, I hope ye will, girlie. Ef 'twa'n't fer the speech o' people, I'd do it myself now." Then, and as if this assurance — never before admitted by him — must be oil upon the

troubled waters of their home life, he turned away.

And poor motherless Hazel, more heartbroken than ever, walked slowly up the hill, biting her lips to keep back the tears. Here she sat down beneath her old pine tree to watch the sunset with wet eyes.

To her, just then, life seemed like that.

CHAPTER II

FOREWARNED now of what to expect from Sam Gates, the joke-loving landlord of the Oakdale House, Stacy halted outside "The Corners," as that village was called, to do what all trout fishermen ever will do — put the big ones on top in his basket. To his surprise, also, he found more in it than he supposed — in fact, fourteen, and three of them would weigh a pound each. He recalled catching one extra big one early that day, but here were three, and a total of more than he supposed he had caught, including the six small ones cooked for his dinner! It was a satisfying exhibit most certainly, if unaccountable, and the only solution, which soon came to Stacy, was that Uncle Asa must have added some to his catch. But how and when?

"Bless his old heart," muttered Stacy, now spreading handfuls of fresh green grass between each layer of fish as he repacked them, big ones on top; "but he is all wool and a yard wide!" Then, and thus equipped to turn the tables on Sam, he strode onward, light-hearted. As he expected, he

found that genial Boniface with a retinue of four of the village "Old Guard" all tilted back in chairs on the hotel piazza, and evidently awaiting him as he drew near. On the face of each was an expectant grin.

"Wal," drawled Sam as he came up, "what luck did ye hev? Ketch a basketful?"

"I did," returned Stacy proudly, "and the best day's sport I ever had! That Bear Swamp brook is a dandy! Why, I had my basket plumb full before I got half way through! A little brushy, of course, but I don't mind that when trout are plenty. I've had the day of my life and a nice mess cooked for my dinner at a farmhouse," he added, unslinging his basket and dropping it in front of the now dumfounded group.

Not a word did one of them utter as Sam spread the handsome trout side by side on the piazza while Stacy watched him smilingly, and enjoyed his discomfiture.

"You said Bear Hole Brook was the best one for trout anywhere about here, Sam," he now drawled in imitation of that worthy, "and it is. I never saw its equal for big ones. How do ye like 'em, Sam?"

Then Sam Gates, the inveterate joker who had sent many a city sportsman into this same Mohawk-

briared morass to laugh at him afterwards, who had also that afternoon sent for his four cronies to come and enjoy this one's detailed experience, now stared first at the array of big trout, then glanced furtively at Stacy's smiling face and then at the grinning ones of the Old Guard and sank back into his chair crestfallen.

"Wal, by hokey, it beats me," he gasped. "Knocks me clar inter the middle o' last week! But you're the fust man who ever cum out o' B'ar Hole with a string like that, you be!" And he looked helplessly around at his cronies.

And then, as if by one accord, they burst into simultaneous laughter!

"Guess it's on yew, Sam," drawled Bascom, the leader of the four, "'n' 'bout time to set 'em up 'fore we go hum to supper, ain't it, Sam?"

And Sam Gates, conscious that the tables had been turned on him handsomely, ejaculated, "'Tis, I guess; come on," and led the way into his bar-room.

It was also many moons ere he heard the last of his futile and loudly proclaimed joke on this "city feller," and its outcome.

That evening, also, when he and Stacy were alone on the piazza enjoying an after-supper cigar and cool air, there came from him, as might be ex-

pected, a revelation anent Uncle Asa Webster and his family history, now especially interesting to Stacy.

"Yaas, Uncle Asa's a nice man," he ejaculated in response to Stacy's description of how he had been cared for and fed; "one o' the salt of the airth, 'n' friend o' everybody. His gal, Hazel, too, is sweeter'n peaches 'n' cream, though she holds herself kinder 'bove the Oakdale boys, howsomever. She teaches school over west side to kinder help out, 'n' sings in meetin', too. She don't hit it off with her stepmother, though, wuth a cuss. Allus naggin' one anuther, they say, 'n' nobody's s'prised fer this un — she was the Widder Baker 'fore she ketched Uncle Asa — allus was a Tartar. She's a schemer, too, this Martha Baker as was. Got Jake to deed over his place to her, take out some insurance fust go-off, 'n' then druv him to drink with her tantrums, 'n' the jims finally, so he hung himself in the barn. She had two boys, wuthless scamps, too. Uncle Asa says the only thing they'll do willingly is git 'round to meals on time. He's a nice man, ez I said, but he got roped in by the widder.

"He got took in wuss'n that, too, 'n' 'bout the same time," added Sam after pausing to relight his cigar, "'n' by a feller named Curtis North. Slick

feller, too, who come up here fishin', 'n' sold him four thousand dollars wuth o' minin' stock not wuth a cuss. Skun Uncle Asa out o' all his savin's with his palaver. This feller, North, was the smartest talker I ever saw. Said he war a banker also, 'n' looked the part with his white side-whiskers 'n' jovial red face, city togs, 'n' watch fob big ez a hen's egg. He stayed 'round here two weeks to do the trick. Got Uncle Asa to take him fishin', went to prayer meetin' 'n' talked 'bout how he loved the Lord 'n' tried to do His biddin', 'n' all that rot. He ketched me, too, by hokey," Sam admitted after another pause. "Ketched me fer five hundred o' his cussed stock in the Rawhide Gold Mining and Reduction Company ez the sartificate has printed on it in big gold letters. Likewise ten per cent. cumulative dividends payable in gold. They must 'a' ben cumulatin' ever sence, fer I hain't seen any. I've got that sartificate framed jist to prove to myself how many kinds o' damn fool a man kin be 'n' live."

"Did you try Bear Hole Swamp on this sharper?" interrupted Stacy, laughing. "And if so, how did he take it?"

"I did, o' course," responded Sam with a droll look, "but it didn't ketch him; he was too slick.

Jist turned tail 'n' come back. Said he didn't feel much like fishin' that day. I'd give up 'nother hundred, though, jist to drop him plumb in the middle o' that tangle once fer luck, howsomever."

"Where was this mine swindle located?" queried Stacy, recalling the scores of them he had heard about.

"Why, in Rawhide, Nevada, it sez in a little book this sharper give out 'round here, 'n' thar war a pictur o' the town in it, too, with lots o' big buildin's, two meetin' houses, 'n' shops with tall chimneys 'n' smoke comin' out on 'em. Nice pictur, looked like everybody thar wuz gittin' rich hand over fist. One big buildin' had 'Bank' over its door, 'n' this sharper said he was president on't. Oh, he did the trick up good 'n' slick!

"The curis part," he added reflectively, after another pause, "is that Uncle Asa won't believe yit he hez ben swindled. Thinks that mine'll pan out all right some day 'n' make Hazel rich. He had the shares made out in her name, too. Why, he's the kind o' man as hears larks singin' all day in the sky, 'n' he'd squeeze sunshine out o' cucumbers, he would."

Much more of the current gossip regarding Uncle Asa, his termagant wife, their home life, and

especially Hazel and the many fellows who had sought to be her "beau" and failed, was now added by this talkative Boniface. Only two portions of it interested Stacy even casually: Hazel's evident superiority to her environment, her out-of-placeness here, and that about the comical side-whiskered sharper who was able to make a fool of a keen-witted Yankee landlord. That seemed very funny to Stacy. And for that reason this chap's distinctive face, white whiskers, watch fob and all — a type quite familiar to Stacy — pursued him even to his room and for a half-hour while he smoked, watched the now moonlit landscape, and vainly tried to locate a man he was positive of having seen, sometime — somewhere. Up and down the land and back and forth across the continent he traveled in thought and ever on the look-out for this exuberant yet elusive face, that like a will-o'-the-wisp, one among thousands, persisted in evading him. At last he came upon it in a little smoke-dimmed, lamp-lit back room of a mining camp saloon, and one of seven men gathered around a table playing poker. He recalled the group now distinctly, all red-shirted, with hats on and smoking, and all but this side-whiskered one belted with ominous "guns" with stocks protruding from holsters. The one most pertinent inci-

dent of this ordinary camp gambling scene was that Stacy noticed and noted how one of the belted poker players — a slim, sinister-eyed Mexican — and the white-whiskered one, were evidently pals and, sitting side by side, now and then passed one another cards. It wasn't Stacy's funeral, as he then thought — it might have been had he made known the facts — but he was too camp-wise to mix into what was not his business, so merely watched the cut-throat game curiously for an hour and then left the den. He now recalled seeing these two together the next day, and only the sharp contrast of their personal appearance — he of the whiskers, well-clad, rotund, and clean; the Greaser, filthy and wearing leggins, a red tie, much soiled red shirt, and sombrero — fixed them in his mind, and as a pair of unhanged rascals.

That one had escaped well-merited justice and after hatching a swindling scheme had come to this peaceful hamlet to "do" these honest folk was evident. That good and trustful Uncle Asa would never receive one penny of his investment was also as self-evident, and the only return was the comical one expressed by Sam Gates of, "how many kinds of a damn fool a man could be and live."

One more corroborative recollection also came to Stacy, which was that this mining camp — a group

of a dozen framed buildings and a hundred stone, sod, and brush-thatched hovels — was called Rawhide.

Another and much pleasanter feature of his one day's sojourn here now superseded him of the whiskers, and somehow, just now, in the utter silence of his room and looking out upon the moonlit mountain, Stacy's thoughts recurred to Hazel once more. Her sweet face first seen bent over an autoharp, her two dainty feet pointing upwards, and even the metallic tinkle of "Don't You Hear Dem Bells A-Ringing?" now came back to him. Then he saw her as the gracious little hostess, serving him a meal as rare as the day itself; neither shy nor forward, just charmingly polite, thoughtful, and dignified, with the poise that only contact with refined and cultured people could give. A little lady, in fact, sweet, piquant, and charming.

"Where did she get it all?" Stacy thought, now preparing for slumber. "Certainly not in this tank town or that old rookery. Either she's been away and learned fast, or it's a case of to the manner born. I'd like to see more of her, anyhow."

Little did he now realize how this simple country girl, with eyes like a peep into a well, was destined to upset all his placid cynicism and serene satisfaction with himself, and lead him a veritable devil's dance of despair.

CHAPTER III

"WAL, did ye kinder turn the tables on Sam?" queried Uncle Asa the next morning, after Stacy's arrival at his ancient abode, and the mutual greeting.

"I did," the younger one responded, "thanks to you, sir, for two things; the tip, and the trout you added to my catch."

"Wal, I'm glad on't," returned Uncle Asa, smiling benignly. "I owe Sam more'n I kin ever pay back in jokes, ye see. Ez fer the trout, I yanked a few outen a pen I keep a lot in, in the medder, jist to top off your string 'n' open Sam's eyes. I've got a couple o' boys — Martha's "— he explained, glancing at the house, "who like fishin' better'n work, 'n' ter keep peace, 'n' them out o' mischief I gin 'em ten cents apiece fer all the live trout they fetch me. We'll take a look at 'em, 'n' then start. I've got the bait dug 'n' hoss hitched up." And this genial optimist led the way to the trout pen. It was a cunningly devised one, a trench four rods long and perhaps five feet wide and two feet

deep, dug near the brook Stacy had followed through the swamp, and full to the brim from a screened inlet from that. Its bottom was of white sand and gravel, one end boarded over for cover, and in this pen were certainly a hundred handsome trout.

"I like to feed 'em, 'n' sit 'n' watch 'em now 'n' then," Uncle Asa admitted. "It's kinder like company; 'n' so does Hazel. Trout allus seem to me like they had minds o' their own," he added, looking fondly at them, "'n' could figger out we was mortal enemies to 'em. Yer can't fool a trout nohow. Yer can't ketch him nappin', either. If he sees ye fust, ye don't see him in a brook. I guess we'd best be startin'," he continued, squinting at the rising sun. "We'd orter started two hours ago in the cool o' the mornin'."

Stacy glanced searchingly all around the house, into the garden, and up towards the big pine, while Uncle Asa was backing the horse and ancient carryall out from the shed, but saw nothing of Hazel. And then they drove away. To Stacy, also, it seemed curious that this old man should so willingly leave his work for an entire day to take him fishing, without an hour's acquaintance, as he had. Yet it had so come about. He also thought of "his whiskers," as he already began to call this Curtis

North in his mind, and wondered if he, too, had been so treated on sight. He also longed to ask Uncle Asa about him, but dared not as yet. Instead, and to allay all suspicion of his own real errand here, he gave an explicit statement of how busy a man he was in the city, how he had been unable to find time for even a day's vacation for years until now, and that Oakdale (heard of through a friend) had seemed an ideal spot to pass a week in.

"It is a perty quiet town," Uncle Asa admitted at this conclusion; "nobody gits rich here, 'n' nobody gits poor. We jist raise 'nuff ter eat, buy a few clothes 'n' pay the parson fer savin' our souls, 'n' that's 'bout all we need, anyhow. I like livin' here," he added retrospectively, "'n' I've ben away jist 'nuff ter knew how comfortin' 'tis. I've ben to Barre a few times, ben ter your city once, 'n' I wouldn't live in either place if I wuz paid fer't. Too much doin', 'n' too much noise. Then agin, salt water's only four mile away down the crick. I've got a boat, 'n' 'bout twice a week or so I go down it 'n' ketch some clams or fetch home some lobsters fer a change. I allus take Hazel 'long when school ain't keepin'," he admitted tenderly. "She likes the fun, 'n' smell o' salt air same ez I do. Thar's whar she teaches," he asserted proudly,

and pointing to the brown roadside schoolhouse they were nearing. "It's jist a mile 'n' a half walk, 'n' a mile to The Corners whar she goes ter meetin' 'n' sings Sundays."

It was self-evident that this Hazel was about all her father lived for.

"This is Rocky Glen brook," he declared, now crossing one a mile up the narrow valley above the village. "It splits jist ahead, 'n' the main stream comes down out o' a gorge ter the left o' the stage road we're on. I'm goin' ter take ye 'round ter the head 'o that 'n' let ye fish down. Then I'll come back to the forks 'n' fish 'tother brook while I wait. Arter that, 'n' if ye hain't ketched nuff by then, we'll go up the stage road 'n' strike the small brook. You'll find Rocky Glen perty good fishin' though."

And so it proved, for once on it Stacy found himself at the upper end of a wide canyon in the mountains west of Oakdale, with a sizable brook and just pitch enough to make pools and cascades adown its laughing course. Trout were fairly plenty in these, no brush to interfere, and by noon when he reached the lower end of this vale his basket was full of speckled beauties.

And now came another surprise, for here at the

foot of this oval valley, rather than canyon, its enclosing hills narrowed to a gateway not fifty rods from the stage road.

He had come to Oakdale to find a site for a dam and space for water storage upon some suitable stream where land was of little value — a rare combination in any settled country — and here was an ideal location facing a fertile valley within five miles of tide water!

It seemed prophetic!

And now, from where he had climbed part way up one of these abutting hills, he could overlook the scattered farmhouses of Oakdale, The Corners or nucleus of dwellings, stores, and two churches that composed it, and away to the bordering line of ocean. Then, and given to air-castle building as he always was, he saw a group of factories just below this water gap, beyond and in place of The Corners a populous city, and further on where the blue rim of old ocean gleamed in the sunlight, an array of the masts of vessels at anchor in a harbor. He did not as yet know if one were there at the outlet of the stream; he did know that the mighty arm of Commerce would dig and construct one if needed. And so for a half-hour, this man of many plans and backed by money power sat building his

air castle of a new city to arise from the magic power of a stream ten rods below him, whose unused energy had been running to waste since the dawn of creation!

"Who owns the land alongside the brook I've been fishing?" he asked nonchalantly of Uncle Asa later on after they met and compared notes on their catches of trout. "I notice the best of the timber has been cut away."

"Wal, the lower part ye fished down belongs to Sam Gates," responded Uncle Asa, "'n' the upper end to the Widder Lewis, Aunt Huldah, we call her. Thar was a second growth o' chestnut on Sam's part, 'n' he had 'em cut 'n' sold ter the railroad fer ties 'bout six years ago."

"The land isn't worth much now, I take it?" queried Stacy cautiously once more.

"No, hardly wuth taxin'," answered Uncle Asa, unconscious of what was in his questioner's mind. "I believe it's put in fer a dollar an acre by Squire Phinney. He's fust seleckman, tax 'sessor, 'n' the whole thing here, ye know."

And then came the secondary feature of the enjoyment of a day's outing, the midday lunch.

"I've brung along a little snack," asserted Uncle Asa after this exchange and glancing up at the sun. "'N' I guess it's 'bout time to injie it."

And he led the way to where he had hitched his sedate nag by the roadside.

"'Tain't much, I don't s'pose," he added apologetically, and drawing a large wooden box from beneath the carryall seat. "I told Hazel to put up the best she could, howsomever." Then he seated himself on a shaded bit of greensward and opened the box.

And now Stacy was impressed by the housewifely abilities of Miss Hazel, for the first item taken out was a small strawberry shortcake, next came a plate of cold boiled ham wrapped in a napkin, then slices of buttered bread, boiled eggs, doughnuts, cheese, and some pickles wrapped in another napkin.

Stacy in his hustling, bustling business and prospecting life and wanderings had eaten all kinds of meals, from the best a first-class hotel could furnish to a slice of jerked venison washed down with lukewarm water from a canteen on the plains, but never one that so woke the zest of good appetite as this. And best of all, the box it came from exhaled the mingled odor of summer savory and sage, recalling his early boyhood and mother's pantry.

He had occasion to recall it many times afterwards.

"You told me on the way up here," asserted Uncle Asa after the "snack" had been duly disposed of and Stacy had lit his cigar, "that you'd ben west a few times kinder lookin' up mines fer your firm. Did ye ever in your goin's round hear o' the Rawhide Gold Minin' Company in Nevada some'rs?"

"No, I never did," answered Stacy, startled at the abruptness of the question. "Why do you ask?"

"Wal, nothin' special, only I didn't know but ye might 'a' heerd on't if ye wuz in Nevada," and Uncle Asa looked at Stacy with his kindly, trustful eyes, then away, and back at Stacy again.

"I dunno but I may ez well tell ye, Mr. Whipple," he continued after this pause. "Ye seem kinder square 'n' honest, 'n' I kinder took to ye on sight ez it war." Then and in his quaint drawl and dialect he told the story in full that Stacy had already heard outlined, with many additions. First, how this Curtis North had come to his home offering ample pay to be taken out fishing, how he had repeated this method of getting acquainted two or three times with many assertions of his own honesty, wealth, prosperity, and how rich a mine he in reality owned; and finally, how he (Uncle Asa) had been lured to invest all his savings in

stock of this mine. It was an old story to Stacy. He had heard many similar experiences, and yet, from various conspiring reasons, this one woke his sympathy and interest as no other one ever had.

And yet he dare not now disillusionize Uncle Asa.

"I begin to worry consid'ble 'bout it," the old man admitted after the tale was told. "I put in every dollar I'd saved up for Hazel, she's perty clus to my heart, 'n' thar's the fix I'm in. It's ben six years now sence I put the money in, 'n' in all that time I hain't heerd a word from it. I wuz in hopes you, goin' round Nevada ez ye hev, might 'a' run onto this mine out thar."

"No," answered Stacy, now feeling that he would give a hundred dollars to see this Curtis North dangling from a rope's end; "I can't give you one iota of information about your investment. I wish I could. I can, however, obtain all that is on record in Nevada regarding this corporation, where located, how much capitalized for, and by whom. This I will surely do when I return to Albion and write you full particulars." And then a glad light came to the face of Uncle Asa.

"That'll be a good deal," he said, "so I'll know suthin', anyhow.

"I wa'n't the only dum fool, if dum fool I war,"

he added, smiling again, "for Sam Gates put in five hundred dollars, too, 'n' he's counted the sharpest man in town. Funny, too, fer that was the very money he got fer his chestnut saplings cut from 'longside the brook you've ben fishin' on. You mustn't tell him, either," he continued after a pause. "He thinks, 'n' everybody thinks, I'm sure, it'll all pan out right in time. Hazel thinks I believe so, too, 'n' I wouldn't hev her know different fer the world. It 'ud break her heart ter know I wuz worryin' at my time o' life."

"Oh, well, it may turn out right after all," returned Stacy assuringly. "Anyhow, it won't do any good to worry. Worry will kill a cat, they say, Uncle Asa, and my theory is that the only thing worth worrying about is our own health. As for this mine investment, try to forget it. I would if I were you."

"I like your idee o' grit," answered Uncle Asa more buoyantly, "but I kin see ye hain't no idee I'll ever git a cent back outen that mine, now hev ye?"

"I won't admit that, not yet," asserted Stacy with well-assumed confidence. "I shall probably go to Nevada this fall on business for my firm, and I'll look that mine up, I promise you, and report the facts to you."

Then Uncle Asa sprang to his feet and extended his hand with eagerness. "Say, Mr. Whipple," he asserted after the mutual clasp, "you've lifted a big load off'n my heart, I tell ye. Now I want you to promise to make yourself to hum at my house while you're stayin' here. Come over any time you feel like it, 'n' any time you want ter go fishin', jist say the word 'n' I'll take ye. Mebbe, too, ye'd like ter go down the creek with me 'n' Hazel arter clams. We cud take 'long a couple o' her gal friends, too — the boat's big 'nuff —'n' hev a clam boil thar. You bein' a young man 'ud enjoy that, sartin."

And when they parted that afternoon in front of the Oakdale House, after Stacy had insisted he take home two-thirds of the trout so that his family could have an ample meal, Stacy's intended sojourn here promised to be a charming one to him.

And that evening also brought another pleasant assurance from Landlord Sam.

"You've jist plumped right down inter good luck the fust ground hop," he asserted after Stacy had described his day's experience, luck, lunch, and all. "It 'pears you've got next to Uncle Asa's heart 'thout any effort, 'n' he's a winner fer entertainin' folks he likes. Then thar's Hazel, bright ez a button 'n' perty ez a pink, 'thout any beau! Why,

young man, you've got a picnic long's you stay here! I wish I was your age! What a heap o' fun I'd hev!"

It looked that way to Stacy.

CHAPTER IV

THE next morning, returning from the hill back of Uncle Asa's — visited for further inspection of Bear Hole swamp valley for possible reservoir use — Stacy espied the polite hostess whose culinary abilities had been so consoling. She was below him in a pasture, partially squatted on the ground, dressed in the same faded calico as when first seen by him, also calico sunbonnet, and busy picking strawberries.

And just then, conscious that he was unseen by her, Stacy halted to consider whether he should advance, accost her, and enjoy a chat, or keep on his way back to the hotel.

And this for reasons that must be explained.

To begin, he was, as stated, a confirmed cynic, and while not a woman hater, his one hectic love experience had convinced him that love is a most charming and delightful illusion in the beginning, but a bitter and painful one in the end. Also, that its natural sequence is marriage, and he was firmly and fully determined that he should never let any of the fair sex lure him to that outcome.

He was also conscious of a more than passing interest already in this girl. Her sweet and piquant face and dainty form, and more especially her dignity and refinement, coupled with a certain sweet simplicity, had already been noticed and noted by him. He had also been informed that she had no recognized admirer, and held herself above the country swains of Oakdale, and was unhappy in her home relations with a stepmother. More than that, he had been accorded the open sesame to that home by her father,— in fact, urged to accept it,— and the gateway to an idyllic love romance thus opened wide for him to enter.

But should he?

It is said that the current of Chance sways and swings and impels us hither and yon as it wills, and the strongest are as thistle-down in its power. Whether that be true or not, Chance determined Stacy's action just then, for while he yet waited undecided, the girl arose, looked up and saw him watching her. There was but one courteous course left him now — to advance and greet her who had been his hostess as a gentleman should, and he did so.

"Good morning, Miss Webster," he said, nearing her and raising his hat. "I saw you from up back here and waited for you to look up so you wouldn't

think I meant to pounce upon you again. Are you making ready for another as delicious a shortcake as I shared with your father yesterday?"

"I am," she answered, smiling at the graceful compliment, "and if you go fishing with him again to-morrow, perhaps you will have some of it."

"Or, better still, if I am invited to your house for supper to-night I'll get it then," he answered.

"You most certainly will — if invited," she returned with just a faint touch of irony.

"But shall I get it?" he questioned.

"Yes, and two pieces if you are there."

"I mean the invitation," he explained.

"Why, yes, if you see father before supper time," she responded naïvely. "He has taken quite a liking to you already."

"I'm glad," he answered more soberly, "for I think your father is a very nice man, and so sunshiny. The landlord of your hotel says he hears larks singing in the sky all day."

"He isn't as much so as he once was," she replied soberly; "he — he is older, you know."

"No wonder," thought Stacy, "with that Tartar wife and money sunk in a mine swindle." Then aloud, "I admire a man who can retain cheerfulness and hear even now and then a lark through old age. Few of us can ever hope for that. But

how about the invitation to supper? Please may I come?"

"Now that you ask for one, you must have it, I presume," she responded smilingly, "and you are hereby and now properly invited to supper at my home, Maple Dell, this evening, six-thirty sharp!"

"And so it's Maple Dell you call it? Well many thanks. I'll be there on time. Evening dress or just ordinary?"

"Oh, evening, by all means," she returned, smiling archly. "A gentleman looks so much more a gentleman in proper attire."

Then, and as if she had granted him all the encouragement he deserved, she turned to her berry-picking again. And Stacy, more than ever interested in this rustic maid with the ease and speech of a city-bred belle, now plumped down on his knees beside her to assist.

For a most charming half-hour he kept at it, chatting meanwhile, eating a few berries, following her about, and now and then peeping slyly at her piquant face smiling out of the depths of that coal-scoop bonnet. Once she caught him at it, flushed slightly, and after that he obtained no more peeps. A wee little chill, also, began to tinge the tone of her voice from that moment on, for Stacy was blessed (or impeded) by rather compelling black

eyes that, as someone described such, "bored into you like gimlets." His speech was always softly modulated, unless in anger, and the one baleful factor in his make-up was his cynicism, that persisted in adding a lurking scorn to his glances. He was keen, also, in reading moods, and it soon dawned on him that this fair maid either felt afraid of him, distrusted him, or that he had offended her by word or glance. She had met his first advances and appeal for an invitation to supper in a pretty, half-coquettish way, and then, presto, had, as he would put it, "frozen up."

"I hope you didn't feel that I was intruding when I coaxed you for an invitation to supper, Miss Webster," he said, rising when the pail was full. "I didn't mean to, certainly, and my excuse is a double one,—I wanted to get better acquainted with you, and another taste of your shortcake. It is even better than my mother used to make."

"That suggests country origin," she responded, ignoring his well-meant compliment, and rising; "I thought you were a city-bred man."

"I am and I am not. I was born in the country, but left it at sixteen, and since then, I must admit, I've been subject to the unholy influences of the city. You don't like city men, I infer, by your tone?"

"I didn't mean you should infer anything," she answered coolly, and turning her expressive eyes full upon him. "I naturally distrust city men, but I do not speak in riddles."

For one instant Stacy was tempted to ask the why and wherefore of this distrust, the next, his better sense prevailed.

"I do not blame you for it," he said instead, "for to the best of my observation, few are worth even a man's confidence, much less a woman's."

"Well, we agree on one thing," she answered, laughing lightly, and turning to go.

"I hope we may find other points of agreement, also, in due time," he said, taking two steps her way. "And now, before you go, may I ask one more favor?"

"You can *ask* for a thousand," she returned pointedly. "I never promise favors to any one. What is it?"

"Why, your auto-harp, this evening, after the shortcake, and the same tune I first thought was ghost music, the day I scared you so. It has been tinkling in my ears ever since."

"I won't promise," she answered abruptly; then, with a "Good-bye, Mr. Whipple," equally abrupt, she bowed and left him.

And Stacy, conscious that he had made no prog-

ress whatever in the good graces of this cool and piquant maid, raised his hat deferentially, said "Good-bye," in the same cool tone, and strode away in opposite direction.

And recalling the various fair ones he had met so far, or more especially how acquaintance with them first began, it recurred to him that never one had so frozen him at the start. In a way, also, it was an abrupt change from her demeanor as hostess, for then she was politely gracious, while now she was politely cool. Now, and as this comparative mood was on, his *bete noire,* the Spanish beauty, recurred, also, and how her subtle flatteries and delicately-veiled insinuations of love-interest first led him on.

"Thank God, she isn't like her!" he exclaimed aloud, at this juncture. "Rather ice or marble than that love trickster for me!"

He little realized just then that it is the maid of ice or marble nature that usually wakens the fiercest love in man.

"There is something back of her chilliness," he continued musingly, and now more than ever pained by it. "When she served me that mid-afternoon meal, she was gracious sweetness personified, and quite charming; now, and after she has seen that her father accepts me as a good fellow,

worth taking fishing — a sure sign that a man likes another — she suddenly freezes up and treats me as if I were a gentleman pickpocket! And I never tried harder to be nice to a girl in my life! I can't understand it!"

Then, and as is natural to a man who first begins to take notice of a maid, he began an analytical survey of this one. Her perfectly ladylike demeanor and command of language, showing culture and refinement; her poise and self-possession, so unusual in such a rustic maid; her quick perception of what was proper to say and do toward him, a stranger, and minor features of her conduct, all conspired to outline a most charming young lady. Her personal appearance came next in this survey. Her delicate features, flower-like face, red-ripe lips, and more especially her eyes — like deep waters, each and all recurred to him, and details of her garb as well. He had noticed that she wore but one ring, a pearl solitaire, while the two dresses he had seen her in — a faded calico and white piqué — while perfectly fitting, were severely plain and probably homemade. All in all, it was evident that no money had ever been lavished on her. Her home, also, came in for review. Its old and worn-out condition was almost pitiful, and, while neat and well kept within, poverty was written all

about, even to the homemade window screens of mosquito netting.

He had been well, even cordially received there, in Good Samaritan manner. Uncle Asa — good old soul! — had, metaphorically speaking, opened his arms to him on sight, given him some nice trout to discomfit Sam, taken him fishing, confided his troubles to him, and treated him with unexpected consideration, in sharp contrast to Miss Hazel's frosty manner. And the reason for it was an almost exasperating riddle!

She was an unattended maid, according to all reports. Old enough and wise enough; also poor enough not to frown upon a fairly good-looking, intelligent, and prosperous young man, who had tried his best to be nice to her, he thought! It was certainly past understanding!

Other vexatious and sharp contrasts soon came his way. The dinner at the hotel that day (corned beef and cabbage — a combination that revolted his soul) was an abomination. The waiting maid, clad in greasy, almost filthy raiment, was chewing gum; the dishes, knives and forks smelled of stale ham fat, and each part of that meal was in objectionable contrast to the dainty one served him at Uncle Asa's by Hazel, with the perfume of lilac blossoms to add zest.

That afternoon, also, seemed a long one to him. He had a lengthy letter to write to his partner, Colby, about the two available sites for dams, proximity of stone to build them, probable cost of land, etc; also asking an investigation of the Rawhide Gold Mining Company. Then, as the landlord was away in a field, mowing, and none of the Old Guard about, Stacy had naught else to do except sit on the deserted piazza, smoke, and watch for passing teams. And, to the best of his observation, the only living creature he saw in two hours of this, was one lone dog, that trotted by. By this time, he was almost lonesome enough to brave propriety by going into the kitchen and visiting with that slovenly serving-maid.

And not a half-mile away was the most charming of country lassies, bright enough to give him a Roland for every Oliver, and a lilac-shaded porch to do it on! Also possessed of an auto-harp and the ability to play it like an Houri!

The strawberry-shortcake supper, to which he had almost begged an invitation, would probably be served about six o'clock. At exactly four he retired to his room to get ready. As might be expected just now — when anxious to look his best — he cut himself shaving, grew vexed, found but one new clean collar in his outfit, and got blood on

that, grew more angry, and at five, precisely, started for Uncle Asa's.

And soon, entering the maple-shaded lane leading to it, its cool charm and the romantic name,— Maple Dell,— given by Hazel to the coign or pocket where the house stood, recurred to him. It was like a sight of her, an impression she created, and suggestive of her. The dooryard, next entered, was another, for its graveled walk was bordered by rows of nasturtiums, just beginning to bloom, not a weed was visible in or around the beds of phlox, peonies, sweet williams, and bachelor buttons scattered over the yard, which, enclosed by a hedgerow of arbor vitæ, was neatness personified. The house itself, half hidden by the two luxuriant clumps of lilac abutting upon the front corners, with big syringa bushes flanking its trellised porch, and moss-coated by age, was the one pitiful feature and suggestive of an ancient tombstone. A pleasanter picture next appeared in Hazel, now responding to his knock on the open door, who, with a slight smile and "Good evening, sir," invited him to enter.

"I must be excused," she added, after taking his hat and ushering him into the parlor. "I am cook and waiting maid both, you see, and father will soon be in to entertain you."

"So it's father whose guest I am," mused Stacy

after she left the parlor, and then he looked curiously around this antique "keeping room." It was that most certainly, for its faded carpet, once an array of big red and yellow flowers and green leaves, its chairs of shiny haircloth, open fireplace, brass firedogs, and lithographs of Revolutionary scenes and family portraits on walls, all bespoke a past generation. The one half-modern feature was a square piano, on which lay the auto-harp he had seen Hazel playing, and a banjo. The two pertinent features suggestive of herself were a book-filled what-not beside the piano and a big cluster of freshly-picked lilacs, on a tiny center table.

Stacy had scarcely completed this inventory when Uncle Asa, arrayed in ill-becoming "biled" shirt and pepper-and-salt suit, came in.

"I'm glad to see ye, Mr. Whipple," he said, with hand-clasp as cordial as his tone; "'n' you mustn't feel yourself company jest 'cause I dressed up. I don't like store clothes," he added confidentially, now seating himself on a chair as if afraid he would slip off, "but Martha said I must put 'em on, 'n' it sorter keeps wimmin good-natered to do ez they say." Then he smiled in a knowing way, as if sure Stacy would understand him.

"We don't hev much company," he continued, without waiting any answer, "only a couple o' gals

here Hazel chums with, 'n' one from Barre, who comes summers 'n' stays quite a spell. You see, Hazel was thar to school a couple o' years, 'n' stayed one winter, too, 'n' it's sorter spiled the young fellers here fer her. Kinder gin her notions 'bout 'em."

"That isn't surprising," responded Stacy, "and I presume a girl of her refinement may not enjoy farmers' sons, unless above the average."

"Wal, that's the how on't, sartin," asserted Uncle Asa, as if all of Hazel's notions must be right; "'n' gals that's kinder got teched by city ways ain't goin' ter put up with fellers that ain't p'tic'lar how they look, 'n' come to see a gal with cowhides on. 'Tain't nat'ral.

"We got a little trip fixed up fer to-morrow," he continued, after a pause; "the one I spoke about to go down the crick with the tide, dig some clams, 'n' hev a boil. I kin pull my pots, too — hain't done it fer three days, 'n' Hazel 'n' them two chums o' hers is goin', too. I'd like ye to jine us."

"I shall be most happy to do so," returned Stacy, wondering if his going was suggested by Uncle Asa first or by Hazel, yet glad of the chance. "I imagine such an outing might be great fun. What time shall you start?"

"Oh, 'bout nine, when the ebb tide makes; ye

see, it's four miles down the crick, 'n' we allus go 'n' come with the tide. We'll take along a few fixin's 'n' things to cook with," he explained, " 'n' make a day on't. I'm sorry this friend o' Hazel's from Barre ain't here ter go," he added, after a pause, " fer she's chock full o' fun, while these two other gals is kinder bashful, 'n' mebbe'll be a little afeard o' you." Then Martha appeared, garbed in shiny black silk with jet trimmings, Stacy was duly introduced, she said, " Our tea is ready, sir," in ceremonious manner, and led the way into their living-room, where Hazel awaited them.

Tea-table conversation with a stranger is almost invariably forced, stilted, and painful. On this occasion, and evidently a state affair in Martha's mind, her attempts at it were as graceful as a cow trying to waltz, for, evidently imbued with the citified importance of Stacy, or the magic of the dollar he had tendered her for a dinner, it appeared to him that her sole wish was to flatter him nauseatingly. And she succeeded to that extent in short order. In vain he evaded and disclaimed her attempts, and when he, as was obligatory, praised the shortcake, with rich cream poured over it, he felt sure that she would answer, " If 'twas all cream, it wouldn't be any too good for you, sir."

But he was spared that climax of absurd flattery, for Uncle Asa got ahead of her.

"Shortcake's good vittles," he mumbled, his mouth full of it, "'n' nothin' better, 'speshly if ye put plenty o' cream on't. This wuz Hazel's, 'n' all right. She took arter her mother in knowin' how to make 'em. 'N' do ye know, Mr. Whipple," he added, as if to crush Martha, "I allus cal'late knowin' how to cook is sorter inherited. Now, thar wuz Hazel's mother; she made shortcake jist like this, no better, though, 'n' 'twas eatin' one on 'em fust set me to thinkin' I wanted to git her fer a wife if I could. 'N' I did. I miss her," he continued, after a pause and sigh. "Miss her more 'n' more ez the years go by, fer she wuz the best woman ever wuz fer me."

That this tribute to Hazel's mother was not relishable to Martha was evident to Stacy. That it, also, pleased Hazel was evinced by a tender glance from her to her father, and then the subject was dropped.

"Good livin' is 'bout all we git out o' life," asserted Uncle Asa, a moment later; "that is, 'cordin' to my notion. Wimmin, as is nat'ral, think more o' fine clothes. They'd 'most starve, some on 'em, fer a new dress, 'n' when I go to meetin' 'n'

see a string on 'em come struttin' in with new, shiny bunnits on, I allus think o' a flock o' peacocks on parade. 'N' the way they look sideways ez they go up the aisle, makes me feel they are thinkin', 'Look at me, now. Ain't my new bunnit too sweet fer anything!'"

But table conversation is too pointless to quote extendedly, and this one was no exception. Once started, Uncle Asa monopolized it, Stacy adroitly urging him on purposely to discomfit Martha and her absurd flatteries. And his droll and optimistic utterances were as new wine to Stacy, who began to admire him thoroughly.

Hazel, however, who had undoubtedly supervised this most excellent meal, and was now content to see their guest well served, said but little. She was the real hostess, however; gracious, yet dignified, and the little she said, or its tone and her casual glances, convinced Stacy that what Landlord Sam had said was true, and that she almost hated her stepmother.

Also, that he had so far failed to advance one iota in her confidence.

CHAPTER V

WHILE strawberry-shortcake was the ostensible object of Stacy's begged-for invitation, his real one was further opportunity of conversation with the cool, keen-witted, fascinating Hazel. It was five-thirty when he arrived at the Webster home, and past nine before Uncle Asa (who had led the way to the trellised porch, followed later by Hazel) yawned, said "I guess it's 'bout time to turn in; be on hand in good time, to-morrow, Mr. Whipple," and bade him good-night.

And then Stacy, seated on the upper porch step, his charmer in a low chair, as far from him as possible, was — much to his satisfaction — alone with her. To add romance, if any were needed, the moon was just peeping over the wooded hills, fireflies twinkled above the meadow below them and in the maples, and the only sound heard in this secluded dell was the near-by murmuring brook.

"I little thought the other day, while fighting my way through that awful swamp," began Stacy,

"that I should come upon you at its outlet, or find so delightful a man as your father, Miss Webster. It's been only about three days since I accosted him, and he already seems like a father to me, and one of the salt of the earth."

"I am glad you like him," returned Hazel courteously. "He is all the world to me. He and my band of pupils," she added after a pause, "for they occupy most of my thought during school terms."

"And so you are not lonesome here, in this quiet hamlet?" queried Stacy curiously. "I should think you might be?"

"No, never; my school and helping mother, for we keep no girl, takes all my time, and when I want company I've two girl friends glad to see me. Then I love books, for they are even more entertaining friends."

"And your music," interrupted Stacy. "I see you have a piano and banjo, as well as auto-harp — when do they come in?"

"Why, odd hours," she smiled, "or when I feel sentimental. Then I strum away on one or another of them, according to my mood."

"And theirs, also, I assume, for each has a different one, I've a theory?"

"Yes, that is so," she answered interestedly; "and they are wide apart. A piano is of the city,

and without soul or feeling, an auto-harp suggests the romantic ballads of the Irish nation or Scotch love songs, while a banjo bears me to the Sunny South and its plantation scenes and barn dances, or black Romeos canoeing with their dusky Juliets."

"I see you have either traveled much or read widely," he interposed, "or you could not so locate the moods of your musical instruments: Which is it, if I may ask?"

"Why, reading," she answered candidly. "The only large city I was ever in was yours, with father, for a four days' visit, and I was at school in Barre, which, I presume, you would call provincial."

"Well, yes and no, Miss Webster," he returned as candidly. "Provincialism is not defined by the size of a town, but rather by the average culture of its inhabitants. I was never in Barre but once, and then on business. I should judge, as I now recall its people and public buildings, churches and library, that it could not be classed as provincial."

Then, and with the intention of drawing her out, he led the conversation into the book world, with results that astonished him. He was fairly well read himself for a busy man, both in current fiction and the classics; had traveled much and attained to the intellectual polish which contact with all classes and grades of humanity gives; was a

keen observer of human nature; and yet here, in this byway hamlet, and now seated near him, was a rustic maid (so believed by him) who had outread him two to one, and with a keen discernment and scope of analysis that astounded him. She had not traveled at all, yet the life in frontier towns of the West, their people, habits, manners, and customs, with which he was familiar, were as much so to her. Through reading she had seen miners' cabins, gambling saloons, dance halls, their orgies, shootings, lynchings, and all that made up frontier life. She had thus seen cowboy roundups, their "chuck wagon," branding operations, and wild rides through towns, shooting at everybody and everything. She was as familiar as he with the grand canyons of the West, its wondrous Garden of the Gods, imposing mountains, vast plains and alkali deserts — even more so, in a way. Purposely, too, perhaps, and to confound this city man, who she knew had traveled in this region, she, with feminine wit, not only asked him questions that he found hard to answer, but politely contradicted him now and then.

Conversation has been aptly described as a game of circles, in which each participant tries to surround and outdo the other. In this case, Stacy, a trifle conceited, perhaps, not only found himself

outdone gracefully, but often put on the defensive.

"I confess you surprise me with your wide range of reading, Miss Webster," he admitted at last. "And your retentive memory. Once you read a book, its facts are at your tongue's end and in orderly array. I've met some so-called bookish ladies, but you surpass them all for a retentive memory and absorption of data."

"I do not read so much to amuse myself as to improve myself," she returned in a gratified tone. "I have never traveled; I never expect to, but I wish to know how other people live, and all about their manners and customs."

"But when and how do you find the time?" he queried in surprised tone. "You said your school and home duties absorbed it all?"

"You have never lived in the country much, I guess," with a light laugh, "or you wouldn't ask that. Do you know what it is to have weeks, months, years of evenings, with nothing to do but read? There are no social diversions in Oakdale," she continued regretfully, "no theaters, not even a town hall to tempt an Uncle Tom's Cabin band of barnstormers, no dances, not even the old vulgar 'kissing parties,' so all we can do is to eat, read and sleep."

"And so you consider the old-fashioned kissing

parties vulgar?" responded Stacy, smiling. "I thought them great larks in my country-town boyhood."

"I do," she returned spiritedly; "especially among grown people, as used to be the case here. They may be permissible among school children, though a silly diversion, but for a gathering of adults — married and single — to disport themselves in that way is — disgusting to me. There are some things that should always wear a halo."

"I think you are right, Miss Webster," he admitted slowly, after a pause, "quite right. But I was only thinking of them among children, and now, as it's nearly time for me to bid you good-night, please won't you bring out your auto-harp and play the tune I thought was ghost music the day I pounced out of the woods and scared you so? It's been haunting me ever since. Please favor me?"

"I do not play before strangers," she answered quite coolly. "I am not expert enough."

"I hope some day you won't class me as a stranger," pointedly, "but I can't accept your excuse. Please favor me just once?"

"You won't demand an encore, I am positive," she responded, laughing lightly, and without further evasion rose and brought forth her auto-harp.

More than that, and as if she wished to make amends for her own chilly demeanor, she not only played that plantation melody with exquisite grace and charm, but several other old-time ballads equally adapted to that instrument.

And never before in Stacy's life were time, place and music so in accord with his own mood and feelings!

The gem of them all, and her concluding one, was, "The Last Rose of Summer," and then she laid aside her harp. It seemed a suggestive act and he promptly rose to go.

"I thank you, Miss Webster," he said feelingly, "not only for your many favors but the delightful evening I've passed. May I ask the favor of another while I am here?"

"Perhaps I shall see you," she returned evasively. "You are to be with us to-morrow I understand." Then, and much to his surprise, she held out her hand.

And just then he felt like stooping to kiss it, instead of an instant's light meeting of their fingers. And that favor made the moonlight that now shone in fantastic patches through the maples adown the lane he followed, the fireflies in them, the low melody of the brook beside it, the broad meadows beyond bathed in silver light, the mountains further

away and faintly outlined, each and all seem a new and wondrous fairyland.

"In love?" you ask.

No, not yet; merely touched by that mystic, magic wand that ever has created and ever will create this world anew.

Another vision inspired by this moonlit landscape mainly, yet partially also by the piquant Hazel, soon came to Stacy when he reached the top of a low hill half way back to Oakdale. From this vantage point the village beyond, white and spectral in the moonlight, rose before him. To the left, the vale, at the apex of which stood that hamlet, opened southward. Through this the four-mile spiral of Elbow Creek, now full to the brim, glistened in the night's silver light, with rim of ocean bordering it and reflecting Luna's smile. And now, halting here in contemplative mood once more, Stacy saw the city his mission here was possibly to bring into existence; saw its fine buildings, its tall church spires, its busy streets, its crowding population, with the masts of commerce pointing skyward where ocean met the broad valley. Then back to Maple Dell his mind now turned, and to the pride and poverty located there. He thought of Uncle Asa, well on in years and robbed of all his earnings, of his household, barely existing in the worn-out, moss-coated house,

and of Hazel, doubtless contributing most of her meager earnings to the family needs, wearing only the simplest raiment, and a recluse, while capable of being a social leader. And as each feature of this prospective city, each possibility of change and betterment to Uncle Asa and Hazel — now going to waste through the gorge of Rocky Glen — came to Stacy like an inspiration, a new ambition and newborn desire to become the master hand and bring this forth thrilled him. With it also, and perhaps inspired by the sequestered romance of Hazel's syringa-embowered and trellised porch, and autoharp, with moonlight and firefly setting, came another and sweeter ambition with her as its queen.

Only for the moment, however, did he feel sure, for recalling his one love experience and its humiliation, his ever-present distrust of all womankind, his love of freedom and latent skepticism, as he now did, that hope or outcome seemed but a passing mood.

"It's moonlight, music, and soulful eyes combined, that's all," he said to himself, now striding onward towards the hotel, "and to-morrow it will all vanish like a cloud shadow. But I'd like to pull Uncle Asa out of his hole, and dress Hazel as she deserves, for all that."

And that impulse and ambition has built more

homes and consummated more marriages than all others combined.

Hazel, however, felt quite otherwise just now, for unknown to her father she was perfectly conscious that he had been robbed by Curtis North and would never receive a penny from his investment. But tell him so, or even hint it? Never, not if she were forced to walk barefoot across coals of fire!

"I can't understand why that man is so anxious to make up with father, or flatter me," she said to herself after Stacy had vanished down the lane. "He is nice-appearing, polite as 'by your leave,' but I am afraid of him. He talks too sweetly. There is something back of his excuse that he is here for a week's outing. City men don't come to Oakdale alone just for that! I shall watch him! Anyhow, he can't wheedle more money out of father, for he hasn't any more!"

CHAPTER VI

ANOTHER breakfast upon the same soiled tablecloth at Landlord Gates's hostelry and another rare June day had come when Stacy walked out of "The Corners" following the now familiar road toward Uncle Asa's. A few farmers were mowing upon the upland meadows east of Oakdale, the whir and clatter of mowing machines mingled with the bobolinks' singing as they circled about and above the roadway; to the southward the valley opened its broadening vista of green salt marsh, and a dozen left-over stacks of salt hay rose in the distance just back from the bordering ocean. Uncle Asa's boathouse peeped above the green expanse a few hundred rods out from and opposite the lane leading up to his home, and here Stacy found the path, a single plank walk on stilts leading out to it. Here, also, he now found the three girls and Uncle Asa awaiting him. A pleasant greeting from the latter and Hazel, and an introduction to two plump country girls, Mollie Bascom and Bertha Phinney, who eyed him curiously, came next. Stacy assisted them into

Uncle Asa's big dory, the mast and lug sail of which were now furled and projecting from the bow. Uncle Asa grasped the oars, and the start down the four-mile course of the winding creek was made.

"It's perty easy goin' out with the current," observed Uncle Asa as the well-loaded craft swept onward with the outgoing tide, "but it's a long way back agin it. We allus start on top o' the tide," he added, glancing over his shoulder to swing around a bend, "'n' come back with it."

"I might save you watching your course by steering with the spare oar," asserted Stacy, noticing the need of it; "that is if one of you two girls on the back seat will change places with me," he added, addressing them.

Hazel, who was one of them, arose speedily, the exchange was made, and Stacy, piqued a trifle by her evident wish to let the other girl sit beside him, began steering.

But the day, the anticipation, the exhilaration of the inblowing sea breeze, together with Uncle Asa's droll badinage and the bantering of Hazel's two friends, soon drove away Stacy's pique and began to merge him into the jollity of the outing, and a share in the chaffing. Hazel also thawed out a trifle, now and then he received a smile from her, and later, at

the request of her father, she reached under a piece of old sail, covering a hamper, and sundry "fixin's" in the bow of the dory, and much to his surprise drew forth a banjo.

She played and sang, too, off hand, without urging, "Nancy Lee," "My Roving Sailor Boy," "Old Zip Coon," and similar ditties, the other girls joined in, Uncle Asa's face wore a contented smile, and so the outgoing trip was made. And a jolly, full-of-good-spirits one, it was also.

At the mouth of the creek, Stacy, his mind recurring to his vision of a populous city arising where The Corners now stood, noticed and noted a small harbor broadening out from it and shut in from the ocean by a ridge of sand. A narrow inlet gave egress at one end of this, into which the sea waves entered white-capped, and close to it stood a somewhat dilapidated spile wharf.

"We'll tie up here," said Uncle Asa, pulling up to it, "'n' unload. Then I'll go out 'n' pull my pots, 'n' when the tide lowers 'nuff we'll dig some clams. Hazel'll show you whar we set table 'n' make a fire," he added, glancing at Stacy as he stepped out on the wharf, and soon the landing and unloading was accomplished. Stacy of course made himself useful as Hazel directed, the hamper, baskets, and a big iron pot were carried by him to

a tiny grove at one end of the sand ridge, and then he showed his tact and good sense.

"You girls are not to do anything except to set the table by and by," he said, assuming leadership now. "Just go down the beach, gather shells or dig in the sand like children, if you wish, while I pick up some firewood. I am here to do the work, so let me, please." And nothing loth, off the three went. Later, and as he expected, he noticed them a quarter-mile away down the beach, minus shoes and stockings and skipping back and forth as the incoming waves washed up and met them on the sloping sands. And now, well versed in such outings, he first unpacked the hampers, spread the tablecloth on the table, set it with the dishes, piled the food upon it and then began gathering driftwood for fuel. Then, and after lighting a cigar, he strolled over to where the sea waves rolled into the inlet.

Here, also, and noticing Uncle Asa far to seaward pulling his pots, Stacy looked around, impressed by the utter solitude, yet sea-coast charm of his surroundings. Far up and down the in and out curving beach, the white-crested waves were curling and breaking, a flock of gulls kept circling above or lighting upon an outjutting sand bar, sedge-covered sand dunes arose back of the beach

as far as he could see, and beyond them were low hills covered with bushes, while inside of the long sand ridge upon which he stood the twenty-acre bay was barely rippled by the breeze. Not a house or human being was now visible except the group of girls far away down on shore, and Uncle Asa a mile to seaward in his dory. Beyond him, however, were many white-winged coasters, just now suggestive to Stacy of what the future of this protected bay might hold.

For a long hour, and seated now in the shade of a sedge-topped sand dune, he mused upon his mission here, Hazel's charm, Uncle Asa's plight, and the grandeur of a lonely wave-washed shore stretching miles away. He grew a little lonely, too, in his solitude, and when he saw the girls returning, hastened to meet them. He felt grateful, too, for their smiles, even the quiet little one from Hazel, and the "You have made yourself very useful," which she vouchsafed when noticing what he had done. Then Uncle Asa, with his lug sail set, rounded into the cove, Stacy hurried to meet him, saw that his pots had yielded a fine catch of lobsters, and now, the tide being out, the two, with basket and clam fork, set about securing the main item of the forthcoming feast.

"How deep is the water in this back bay?"

queried Stacy when with shoes and stockings off he was picking up the clams out-turned by Uncle Asa's fork.

"Wal, it's 'bout three fathom in the channel, low tide," answered Uncle Asa, "'n' mebbe one to two over most on't."

"A fair-sized schooner could run in then," rejoined Stacy nonchalantly.

"Wal, yes, at high water," returned Uncle Asa, unconscious of his companion's thought. "Thar is one fetches coal fer Squire Phinney every fall, a two-hundred-tonner owned in Barre. I've sometimes thought," he added slowly, "that if the crick wuz dug out some, she could be towed up to whar my boathouse is, 'n' save haulin' coal over four mile o' sand. Nobody thinks on't, though, but me. In fact, nobody comes down here much but me, 'n' I pick up a good many dollars ketchin' 'n' sellin' lobsters, year through. I'd ruther do that than farm it. I like the smell o' the sea, too, 'n' it's bracin'."

"Oakdale's asleep," thought Stacy, "but it will wake up a year from now." Then the clams were washed, Stacy put on his foot garb, and the two men returned to where the girls were.

Uncle Asa took charge now, put sea water in the big iron pot he had brought, filled it with clams,

started the fire, then went to his boat and returned with five lobsters split and ready for broiling. Meanwhile, Hazel and her two mates had reset the table, adding a few wild flowers they had brought, and in due time the party gathered around it and partook of a meal, the zest of which, aided by the crisp sea breeze, can never be equaled by any café or hotel the wide world over. The crowning feature, also, was an ample supply of field strawberries, picked by Hazel that morning, with a jar of cream that came packed in ice, to add richness.

And just now, as he compared this meal with the corned-beef-and-cabbage one of the day previous, and Hazel with the gum-chewing maid who served it, Stacy felt that for once the gods had been good to him.

After this, and since the girls insisted upon it, Stacy and Uncle Asa withdrew to a shady spot, leaving them to attend to matters for which they were better trained than men, and here Uncle Asa, satisfied with what had come about so far, gave utterance to a few homely truths and confidences that may well be quoted.

"Good vittles," he said in response to praise from Stacy of this unique meal, "is 'bout all the real comfort we git out o' livin', arter all. We build fine houses, put on show-off clothes 'n' strut

'round some, but nothin', to my mind, is more consolin' than suthin' that tastes jist right. We live quiet-like," he added as if that needed asserting, "Martha keeps the house clean, now 'n' then chases me with a mop or broom, Hazel goes to meetin' to sing twice a week, 'n' fetches 'nuff prayer home to keep us goin', 'n' so we live. Then thar's the two boys, Martha's ye know; wal, them boys, I cal'late, never inherited much o' the grace o' goodness, or ketched it either. They keep me guessin' most o' the time to figger out what scrape they'll git into next. I can't coax 'em or scare 'em to work, they play hookey from school 'most every day — I'm glad they don't go to Hazel's — 'n' my idee is they'll fetch up in jail. Curis, too," he added meditatively, "how what's bred in the bone'll come out in the flesh. Now their father — wal, he was counted no good, 'n' hung himself in a fit o' tremers, 'n' — wal, I s'pose my takin' up Martha 'n' them boys was one o' the crosses the parson sez we've all got to shoulder to git into heaven. I think I'll arn a harp, too, if them boys keeps on the way they're goin'.

"Thar's one thing allus comforts me," he continued after a pause; "we ain't to blame fer our relations, but I'm dern thankful we kin pick our friends. Now, I hain't many relations livin', but

those I had allus borrowed money o' me 'n' never paid it back, 'n' one, a nevy, cost me over a thousand dollars gittin' him out o' scrapes, 'n' when I wouldn't any more, called me a cussed miser."

"Ungrateful, eh?" interjected Stacy.

"Wal, no, couldn't call it that," returned Uncle Asa; "jist the habit o' relations. I've heard it said, if ye want money go to strangers, if ye want advice go to friends, 'n' if ye want nothin', go to your relations, but mine allus turned this 'round 'n' kep' me poor." Then he paused, sighed, and looked away out over the broad ocean, as if a less selfish world might lie beyond it.

"I hain't much longer to stay," he continued after this. "I've done the best I could for everybody, 'n' the one thing worryin' me is Hazel 'n' her futer. Martha's got 'nuff to live on in her own right, but all I got fer Hazel is the house that ain't wuth shinglin', some land, 'most worn out, B'ar Hole Swamp, 'n' that Rawhide stock. 'N' when I git thinkin' on't 'n' the cuss that bamboozled me, my hide gits raw, too, dern him!

"Hazel is peculiar, too," he added after another pause; "so fussy she won't look at Oakdale boys, 'count o' their manners 'n' ways. One on 'em tried to spark her, fact all on 'em hev one time or 'nother, but this un, wal, he come courtin' with cowhide

boots 'n' dirty shirt on, 'n' Hazel shut the door in his face. I gin her two years o' schoolin' in Barre, let her stay thar one winter to ketch onto city ways, 'n' it spiled her fer Oakdale fellers, I'm sartin."

And just now, recalling her as she impressed him the evening previous, Stacy did not wonder at it.

He also felt a little piqued at the way she had treated him so far this day. He had not expected any alone-with-her chats with these two mates of hers in the party, still she might have been more companionable, and at least invited him to gather shells or pick flowers with herself and her companions, in place of the long hour he was left to solitary meditation, he thought. And just now, with dishes washed and packed, instead of joining Uncle Asa and himself, they were again romping down the beach, throwing skip-stones or gathering shells. Beyond all question, he wasn't in the game, or so considered.

But the rising tide and lowering sun soon said that it was time to return, at least Uncle Asa now asserted it, and led the way to reloading the boat, and the return was begun. Then, and for the first time during this day's outing, Miss Hazel disclosed a shade of coquetry, or disposition to be kind to Stacy.

"I'm going to sit in the stern with you, Mr.

Whipple," she said gaily, as she, first to enter the boat, did so. "I like to look ahead and watch the birds, and sometimes we see a muskrat plunge off the bank."

"Will you play the banjo if I permit you?" he returned, in the same bantering tone. "If so, I shall esteem it an honor."

"If you will sing, I'll play," she replied, smiling at him, for the fact was that this occult little lady felt that their guest deserved some consideration.

And now, across the bay and into the narrowing creek, with their boat in the shadow of the tall marsh grass, she tuned up her banjo, and even Uncle Asa felt compelled to join in the chorus of "Dandy Jim of Caroline," "Kingdom Coming," "Old Nicodemus," "Suwanee River," and a dozen other plantation ballads suited to a banjo. Now and then she interjected a sentimental one, and when the mountain shadow had crossed the narrowing valley and they nearing home, she sang "Nellie Gray" and "Massa's in the Cold, Cold Ground" with a caress of feeling, and marvelous soprano voice, that thrilled every fiber of Stacy's soul.

"I don't like them," she said, in response to his words of praise, after she stopped. "Those songs are too melancholy. They seem appropriate, how-

ever, just at sunset, after a pleasant day's outing," she added a moment later, "and a contrast from the foolish ones I've been inflicting upon you."

Stacy, of course, as was his duty, helped Uncle Asa carry things up to the house, gave due thanks to both him and Hazel for the day's enjoyment, bade them adieu courteously, and then, carrying, in two packages, the two pairs of lobsters which Uncle Asa had insisted that Hazel's chums should take home, he departed villageward with them.

And now he found they were much more gracious and chatty with him during the walk than Hazel had been.

Later, and after Uncle Asa had finished his milking, Hazel met him at the barn-yard gate.

"Has Mr. Whipple said anything to you yet about investing in any mine stock, father?" she asked.

"Why, no," he answered positively; "what put that into your head, girlie?"

"You won't if he does, will you, father; promise me that?"

"Sartin, sure I won't," watching her curiously. "I hain't no more money to put into anything." Then, and after another long stare at her, he added, "Put that notion right out o' your head, Hazel, 'n'

keep it out. That man ain't no mine sharper, he ain't, 'n' I like him."

"So you did the other one, you said, father."

"That's true," he answered, sighing; "'n' I wuz wrong. Mebbe I'm wrong now, mebbe I am."

And that evening Stacy, who found Sam and his Old Guard almost stupid companions, had hard work not to do a foolish thing — or what seemed so to him — and hie himself away to Maple Dell.

CHAPTER VII

A RAINY day to a busy man in a city is but an incident scarce noticed, and evaded by an umbrella, while in transit from home to office or store, or returning; but to such a one, shut in a small country village hotel, with posters on its office walls, or one or two old weekly papers for sole reading matter, it is "pizen," as Uncle Asa would say.

Such a day faced Stacy the morn succeeding his delightful shore outing. Sam was surly, the Old Guard missing, and after two hours of watching the highway, while not a soul passed, he grew desperate, donned his waterproof coat, and with rod and basket started for Rocky Glen brook. A fair catch of trout and a thorough soaking were his reward, and returning, a sudden and heavier downpour as he neared the byway schoolhouse of Hazel's occupancy, drove him into its porch. Curiously now, and for what reason he never knew, he tried its door and, much to his surprise, found it unlocked. To enter was no harm, he felt, and so he did. There was nothing in it of value, school

term having closed the week previous, a few ink-stands and useless pens scattered along the wall-shelf — the old-time way around desks in such temples, the teacher's desk was locked, and back of it, above the small platform, was the customary blackboard. All these simple fittings were but reminders of his own boyhood, for in such a building Stacy had first received tuition, and then as his eyes traversed the room, a curious chalk-made picture on the blackboard caught them. It was meant to be that of a young lady, holding a rod in one hand, a book in the other, and beneath it the legend, "My teacher, I love her."

And then, despite his rain-soaked condition and hunger — it was past noon now — Stacy laughed heartily at the schoolboy handiwork and inscription, both so grotesque and absurd.

"Well, I don't blame you, whoever you are," he exclaimed after the laugh; "I guess I shall love her myself if I stay here a week."

And then, seating himself while he waited for a lull in the downpour, both the comic and pathetic side of this incipient love disclosure came to him.

"Love is both the biggest fool illusion and the nearest-to-heaven one that stirs human emotions," he commented aloud. "I know just how that boy felt. I had the same dose myself once, and how

many miles I tramped to find and bring that blue-eyed schoolma'am bunches of arbutus and sweet flag buds to win a thank-you. I'm glad nobody but myself ever knew. And what double-distilled, dyed-in-the-wool fools that insanity will make of a man," he added, now thinking of La Rosa Carmen; "for once the mania is on, they will not only sink into mumbling idiocy, but find forgiveness for a woman who not only betrays every trust, but scorns even decency! We prate about being strong, we men," he continued sneeringly, "but we are as limp rags wound round the finger of a pretty woman when in love with her, and willing, even thankful to be used to wipe her shoes with! Bah, what fools we are, and can't help it either!"

Then glancing around the little bare, cheerless room, with its warped floor, open Franklin stove, smoke-browned rafters, and knife-hacked benches, the peculiar situation and pathos of Hazel's life came to him, and how, even on the worst of wintry days, she faced icy blasts and snowdrifts to earn a few dollars to help pay home bills! And he had lavished over a thousand in eight months on La Rosa Carmen, with the net result of despising himself in return!

"I've got the experience, anyhow," he muttered grimly, now leaving the poor little hovel of learn-

ing, "but guess I'd better cut stick from Oakdale before I get any more."

When he reached the hotel — this being Saturday — a letter awaited him from Bert Colby, his partner, that now forced the same conclusion.

"If you are satisfied with your examinations of Oakdale streams and their availability for our purpose," it said, "you had better go to Barre at once and close contracts. Make dates for on-account payments as early as possible, also insert a forfeiture clause in contract, all properly witnessed. Shall expect you back by Wednesday. There is another deal on which may necessitate your going to Nevada this summer."

"All right, my boy," exclaimed Stacy, after perusing this missive, and then Uncle Asa's plight and the Rawhide swindle recurred to him at once.

"I'll look you up, Mr. Curtis North, you and your swindling act, when I go to Nevada," he added, "and see if there is any show to jail you."

With dry clothing on, Stacy now betook himself to the piazza to watch the sun, just smiling out from above the western mountains, and wait for supper and a feast upon the trout he had brought in. And just then he spied Uncle Asa coming up the road with a basket in his hand.

"I thought I'd fetch ye a little suthin' to tickle

yer tongue with," he said cheerily, now mounting the piazza where Stacy was alone. "I went down the crick to-day to bait my pots over, 'n' dug ye a mess o' them clams ye liked so well. Thar's four lobs, too," he added, handing the weed-topped basket to Stacy, "'n' ye kin hev 'em briled or biled, ez ye like." Then, and after due and cordial thanks from Stacy, he seated himself near him.

"Be ye goin' to stop here much o' next week?" he queried after a pause, and glancing curiously at Stacy. "If so, mebbe I kin take ye fishin' 'nother day, or we kin go to the beach agin, jist you 'n' I 'n' Hazel, or take her chums 'long, ez ye prefer. I s'pose ye hev other business here 'cept jest injyin' yerself, Mr. Whipple?"

It was an adroit query for Uncle Asa, but Stacy, keener than he to read others' minds, saw that something lay beyond this.

"I have and I haven't, Uncle Asa," he answered candidly. "That is, I came here for a double reason; the principal one to enjoy a few days' rest, the other to look this town over for a purpose I can't even hint to you. It isn't to sell mine stock or anything to anyone, however," he added, smiling. "Some day I will tell you first of all what the purpose is, but until then, may I ask you to promise

positively not to repeat what I have said to anyone, not even to your daughter, Hazel?"

"I will, sartin," returned Uncle Asa, looking relieved; "'n' here's my hand on't," and he extended his to Stacy.

"I hope ye'll 'scuse me for sorter pryin' into yer business," he continued; "only knowin' the kind o' layout Sam sets up, I thought it must be some business that 'ud keep ye here long."

"Not more than a month, anyhow," laughed Stacy, "unless you'd take me for a boarder, with fishing or on shore trips every day. However, I can't go again. I am to leave here Monday."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Whipple, derned sorry," Uncle Asa ejaculated earnestly. "I've kinder took to ye ez it war, 'n' I'd like to see more o' ye. Can't ye come agin 'fore summer's gone?"

"I may," returned Stacy, his heart warming, "and you may be sure I shall expect you to take me on all sorts of outings if I do." He came near adding Hazel's name to this cordial wish, but did not.

"There is another matter I can assure you on," he continued in lower tone and glance at the hotel door. "I shall go to Nevada this summer and will look up your mine investment and advise you if there is any show for you to get your money back.

Also, and if possible, I'll set the minions of the law on this Curtis North if he can be found."

"I thank ye, Mr. Whipple, I thank ye from way down," responded Uncle Asa earnestly, and rising, "I must be goin' back now, it's 'most chore time. I'm sorry it's Sunday to-morrow," he added, offering his hand again. "I'd take ye out some'rs if 'twa'n't. You'll — you'll drop down to see us in the evenin', won't ye?"

"I certainly shall," returned Stacy as earnestly, "and thank you for your kind assurances of good will."

"Nice old man," he soliloquized after Uncle Asa was well away from the hotel steps; "good as gold, and honest as the day is long. But how the devil came he to link that termagant widow to his fortunes or poverty, with Hazel to keep house for him?"

That evening with its late rising moon to once more outline the winding spiral of Elbow Creek with glints of silver sheen was a long one to Stacy. Sam and the Old Guard were in evidence as usual on Saturday evenings; they told stories galore — some new to Stacy, some that were on crutches when he was a boy; they discussed Oakdale gossip and Uncle Asa's affairs — the latter with a freedom that now disgusted Stacy, until finally to escape this boredom

he retreated to his room and solace of a lone cigar. Oakdale, while a charming rural hamlet, held only two people that now interested him.

Sunday morning dawned bright and fair. Stacy dressed in his best, waited for first bell call and the arriving church attendants, then as soon as he saw Hazel come up the road, hastened to follow her into the larger of the two churches, and seated himself in a rear pew. The usual fair-sized congregation was there, or came in later. The regular order of prayer first, singing, scripture-reading, prayer again, then another hymn, came duly, but the only face that brought furtive glances from him was Hazel's piquant one, as it arose from the choir curtains over or back of the pulpit. The second hymn was sung by her alone and somehow Stacy, whose eyes never once left her face during it, now wondered how so marvelously sweet a voice could issue from such girlish lips and throat. And best of all, she sang as though interceding for the lives of her hearers, yet as much at ease as a bobolink perched on a tree-top. He wondered, too, if she saw him, hoped she wouldn't consider his coming as impertinent curiosity, or his watching her rude conduct; and as this was the first time in two years he had been to church, he dropped a two-dollar bill — folded as small as possible — on the contribution plate. He

was stared at covertly from all sides and the moment the benediction was uttered, hastened out.

He also watched for Hazel from his vantage point of the hotel piazza, saw her emerge from the sanctuary with one of her two girl chums after most had left it, then go away with her. Later, the two returned together, and after close of service Stacy received a smile and bow as she passed the hotel, homeward bound.

And now recalling Uncle Asa's peculiar inquiry, its way and wording, his evident relief on being assured that he had nothing to sell Oakdale people, Stacy saw a light.

"Hazel thinks I am another Curtis North," he said to himself, and then he laughed aloud for he had been seriously hurt by her almost painful coldness.

Then and there, also he formed another resolution, two resolutions in fact. First, that he would leave no stone unturned to find this mine swindler and make him disgorge, if possible; the other, that in no way or manner would he attempt to disabuse Miss Hazel until her own observation had enlightened her as to his kindly good-will toward her father. Pursuant of that intention, and from pique, also, he resolved that he would be as cool and indifferent towards her as she had been to him, at the call he was soon to make. And so it happened when he

once more walked leisurely up to the syringa-flanked front porch and found Uncle Asa and Hazel occupying it, his greeting to her was formally polite, but very cordial to her father.

"I enjoyed those clams immensely, Uncle Asa," he said at once. "Albion is so far inland that we never get them there; in the West they are an unknown delicacy, and the banquet you served on the beach was one I shall recall many times — especially those lobsters you broiled so nicely."

"Wal, I'm glad on't," asserted Uncle Asa bluntly, "'n' bein' sorry ez I allus am fer folks ez has to live in the city wuz why I fetched ye 'nother mess.

"I wouldn't live in the city if I wuz paid fer't," he continued, "street cars rattlin' all night, folks bumpin' 'gainst ye whichever way ye turn, 'n' skeered all the time least ye git yer pocket picked. The country's good 'nuff fer me."

"Yes, and for me, too," admitted Stacy, "for it makes me feel myself a boy again and takes me back to boyhood days once more. I went fishing in the rain yesterday, Miss Webster," he continued in formal tone, turning to her, "and on my way back took refuge in your schoolhouse to escape a shower and had a hearty laugh over what I saw inside it."

"You did?" she queried curiously. "What was it?"

"Why, one of your boy pupils, I presume, is so enamored of you that he has drawn your picture in chalk on the blackboard and written under it, 'My teacher, I love her.' The picture, however, does not do you justice."

"I wish you had rubbed it out," she responded flushing. "I don't like to be so caricatured."

"I don't believe the boy meant it in that way," returned Stacy, smiling. "He was merely suffering the qualms of incipient love and took that way of telling you. I once went through the same agony myself. And by the way," he added to change the subject, "permit me to thank you for the rare treat of your solo singing in church this morning. I did not know which church you sang in, I dared not ask Sam for fear of making comment here, so watched for and followed you. You have an exquisite voice of rare sweetness."

"Thank you," she answered simply. "How did you like the sermon?"

"Why I — I don't believe it impressed me as it should, maybe," he answered hesitatingly; "too much or too profuse explanation of old Biblical doctrine and why we must be sure to save our souls anyhow. Too doctrinal, I should say. What I want from the pulpit is up-to-date sermons, how to live rightly to-day, and what our duties to one an-

other are in this day and generation. Christianity and the church are doing a great and noble work and making humanity better, more charitable, more conscientious, and the world more fit to live in day by day. But the church needs broader and more forceful preachers. Men who can thrill a congregation, inspire them to rise above personal selfishness week days, teach them that doing good to-day is to improve the to-morrow of our race, shame them out of their indifference, and that to live the Golden Rule to-day is far better than to worry whether their souls will be saved to-morrow. Then, to my mind, the long-drawn-out argument of personal salvation is solely an appeal to our selfish natures and of no benefit to us."

"'N' I agree with ye," interjected Uncle Asa promptly. "Grace o' God is skeerce in this world, 'n' doin' ez ye'd be done by skeercer still, 'n' 'tain't helpin' matters to spend time tellin' folks a front seat 'n' a harp is all they need to live fer. I've allus figgered a good deed is the best sort o' prayer, 'n' counts most. It may not 'fect the scoffers, they'll say ye hev an ax ter grind anyway, but it'll 'fect now 'n' then one, mebbe. Leastwise, I allus feel more contented arter I've done somebody a good turn, 'n' the birds' singin' allus sounds a *leetle* sweeter."

"You ought to occupy our pulpit one Sunday, Mr. Whipple," interposed Hazel in tones that Stacy imagined held a note of sarcasm. "You certainly would enlist more attention than our minister."

"Why, I gave him attention enough," rejoined Stacy curtly, "and if he failed to interest me it wasn't my fault, was it?"

"No," she answered as spiritedly, "but I assume that you listened solely to criticise, not to be improved. Anyone can criticise and sneer, it's the easiest thing to do, but to be charitable and read the good intention beyond words is quite another matter."

And then Stacy felt as if he had disturbed a hornet's nest.

"I admit your assertion," he responded suavely. "It is far easier to criticise than originate, or even be charitable. But you asked my opinion of the sermon; I assumed you wished an honest one. Or — is it as a noted cynic once asserted —'folly to tell ladies the truth, they prefer lies so long as they be sweets'?"

There was a glint in Hazel's eyes at this which he failed to see, but her answer came sweet as the murmuring brook. "Oh, yes, we do prefer lies and always have preferred them from force of habit," she answered suavely, "since about all we ever hear

from the lords of creation is some fairy tale. I, for one, expect nothing else, and quite enjoy the stories that men make up — so long as I don't believe them."

"You two'll git pullin' hair if ye keep on," interjected Uncle Asa, "'n' 'tain't nat'ral. I never knew but one man who allus argered with a woman, 'n' he had to cook his own vittles finally, 'n' the only one who went with him when plantin' time come was the hearse driver, 'n' he wa'n't a mourner."

Then Stacy laughed heartily and so the sharp-shooting ended.

"I will admit that you have the better of the argument, Miss Webster," asserted Stacy after this, "but as music will soothe the savage breast, which means mine just now, won't you favor me with your auto-harp once more? As I leave in the morning and can't say when I'll visit Oakdale again, if ever, I'd like to carry away a pleasant memory."

"And won't you without that?" she inquired pleasantly. "I certainly didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

"I am sure you didn't," he returned earnestly, "and I enjoy a verbal tilt — always. But this porch, the surroundings and yourself here, seem so like a sequestered nook in a better world, I'd like to complete the illusion that way."

"I thought you were to stay a week or more"— inquiringly —"it's only been four days?"

"Five, to be exact, since I first heard your spirit music whispering through the pines."

And just now, in spite of his intention of repaying Hazel in kind for her cool demeanor, Stacy wished Uncle Asa — good soul — would go to bed.

But the evening was waning, and recognizing this, perhaps, as well as her callous mood, Hazel now brought out her auto-harp once more, and for a witching half-hour its tinkling melody vibrated through the moonlit maples, then Stacy arose.

"I thank you, Miss Webster, and you, Uncle Asa, for what has made my Oakdale visit a red-letter one in my calendar," he said earnestly, and offering his hand, first to Uncle Asa, then to Hazel, "and now good-bye."

And recalling that evening almost hourly for many days afterwards, its piquant charm, Hazel's perfect poise and repartee, her exquisite voice in church, the brook-like tinkle of her auto-harp, and the witchery of Maple Dell, each and all many times, their charm kept growing upon him until they seemed a glimpse into another and better world.

"I'm going to call it Hazel Dell," he would say to himself when this mood was on, "for she is of it and akin to it in purity and sweetness."

CHAPTER VIII

STACY had expected that two days would suffice for his visit to Barre and the closing of contracts, but the preliminary haggling over terms, payments, etc., with the committee of five of the city's councilmen, consumed time, during which several things happened, and one disclosure came of peculiar interest which must be recorded.

The first of these happenings was the introduction to him by the chairman of the committee in the hotel office the third evening of his stay in Barre of a dapper little person by the name of Leon Otero, who informed him that he had heard of the city's plans for obtaining power from Oakdale, that he was agent for the supplying of emigrant labor on such work as Stacy had in hand, and was here for that purpose. He gave Stacy his card bearing a New York address, and politely requested that he might supply whatever laborers Stacy might need.

"We shall want a hundred or more of them," Stacy assured him in response, "and I will keep your card and correspond with you as soon as we are ready to go ahead."

"You haf your site for ze dem selected and ze land secured, haf you not?" inquired Otero in foreign accent. "There are two, ze committee tell me, can be used for ze dam?"

"Why, yes, three in fact," returned Stacy, now on guard.

"But you, sir, must have decided which one is ze best," persisted Otero. "If you haf not and you wish me, I would advise. Ef you hire of me ze men I must go before and haf house put up for zem to live in."

"I shall make no decision without further consultation with my partner," responded Stacy firmly, "and after that you may hear from me," and so closed the interview.

Later, and after writing full details of proceedings so far to Colby, he began to give this Otero and his proposals some thought.

"Curious, and I can't quite line up that fellow and his intentions," he muttered to himself, lounging in one corner of the hotel office in an easy chair, and lighting a fresh cigar. "He seems anxious to find out what's none of his business, and where have I seen that face?"

And then backward through the pages of his memory Stacy started to find this Otero's peculiar face, sinister and shifty black eyes and little black-

pointed mustache! Somewhere he was positive, but where? Then he drew forth his card inscribed "Leon Otero, Emigrant Agent, 441 West 23rd Street, New York," and read it again as if therein lay a clue. In vain, for this fellow's face, either Spanish or Mexican, he was positive, still eluded him. After a half-hour of this vexatious pursuit of a face, he telephoned Davis, chairman of the committee he was negotiating with, for information regarding this fellow. The answer was vague and also suspicious, inasmuch as it appeared that this Otero had presented himself to Barre's committee a few days previous to Stacy's arrival, and possessed the information that these negotiations were in progress and that Oakdale had been selected as site for the intended power supply. The source of this information was not forthcoming, however.

"It must be in the air," Davis asserted to Stacy after this explanation. "He came to me with the assurance that he had been informed of our intention and was anxious to secure the contract for laborers, which seemed plausible. I told him you were the one to apply to, and were expected here in a few days, and he has been waiting for you. There is another man with him, stranger here also, an older man — red face, white side-whiskers. They are stopping at another hotel than yours, I believe."

It wasn't much information, but some, and certainly mysterious for the reason that this Otero had obtained facts which Stacy had hitherto supposed were known only to his firm and Barre's committee.

"There is something queer about this," Stacy muttered, hanging up the receiver, and then this Otero's persistent anxiety to obtain the location of the intended reservoir struck him as peculiar and uncalled for.

"He'll find out nothing!" Stacy muttered again, and then began to wonder who this other stranger was, and what possible connection he had with Otero's mission here.

The next morning, and while strolling along the limited water front of Barre, whom should he meet but this Otero again, and with him a rather flashily-attired gentleman with luxuriant white side-whiskers, whose flushed face and rotund stomach, across which lay a massive gold watch chain, betokened prosperity, at least. "This ees my friend, Mr. Curtis," Otero said, thus introducing him after formally greeting Stacy. "He ees here on pleasure himself, it ees."

"Just looking this country over for a few days," explained Curtis airily, "and to keep an eye on my friend, Otero."

"I shall hope you will haf your beesness con-

cluded, Mr. Whipple," added Otero, "and I can obtain your order for ze men you will need before you leaf. Shall you go again to Oakdale before to Albion?"

"I don't expect to," responded Stacy curtly. "I shall, however, write you in New York as soon as we decide when we shall begin operations." And then the two passed on.

"It's he, by Jove, it's he!" exclaimed Stacy five minutes later, after these two had passed beyond earshot, "and the identical man who swindled Uncle Asa!"

Then back to a little smoke-dimmed gambling den in a Nevada mining camp he flew in thought, and to the two pals he had seen swapping cards there!

But the name, Curtis, in place of North, the sharper who had invaded Oakdale, and the reason thereof combined to form a new mystery. Piqued by this even more than by the other one, he now turned upward from the water front and hastened to the only other reputable hotel in Barre to look on its register. That yielded a clue, for turning its pages a week back, there in bold flowing hand was the name "Pentecost Curtis" from New York, above that of Otero!

Then Stacy gave vent to a low whistle.

"'Some snakes mit de grass,' as Old Rip said,"

he thought, turning away, and hurried back to his own hotel to await ten o'clock, when he was to meet with the committee again. Here, while he was cogitating upon these two peculiar and pertinent disclosures: Otero, the ostensibly innocent contract labor agent and former pal of the sharper who swindled Uncle Asa, now seemingly anxious to find out where his firm were to build their dam; that same swindler, Curtis North, registered as Pentecost Curtis, now with him — well, to Stacy, a keen-witted business man well used to the pursuit of the elusive dollar, the two facts and their coincident application seemed positive proof of some sinister game afoot. Curtis, or North, as Stacy was positive that he was, was undoubtedly well supplied with money. Otero was a pal of his, both were as unscrupulous as two unhanged swindlers could be, and both here for some game far deeper and beyond the innocent one of Otero's securing a contract for fifty or one hundred Italians.

But what was it?

For a long half-hour Stacy thought and studied upon this occult mind-reading problem without success, and then a light came.

"I see it, by Jove, I see it," he exclaimed, jumping up. "Curtis, or North, and maybe neither is his right name, is the backer with money. Otero is

the tool and their game is to find where we are to locate our dam, then steal a march on us by buying up the land and making us settle!"

And then like a flash of white light came another inspiration and conclusion so comical that Stacy laughed outright!

"I see your game, Mr. Pentecost Curtis," he said, shaking with suppressed laughter, "and I'll make you buy Bear Hole Swamp of Uncle Asa and pay well for it, too!"

This was so funny, and such a fine turning of the tables, that he shook again with the enjoyment of it.

He quieted himself for his meeting with the committee, for they were shrewd, sharp business men, bent on driving the best bargain possible. Stacy was not asleep, and after a two-hour session, he obtained all he hoped for in contracts duly witnessed, and all that remained was to secure Rocky Glen Brook valley of Sam Gates, then go ahead and build his dam, harness the giant now laughing there in innocent glee, and start the wheels that would turn the hamlet of Oakdale into a prosperous and busy city.

But first to land this despicable Curtis North, and do it thoroughly.

It was easy, too, in a way, the door wide open,

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the trap all set, and all that remained was to bait it. And now forewarned, forearmed, and "loaded for bear," as Uncle Asa would say, Stacy sought out Otero.

"I have closed my contracts," he assured him with well-assumed satisfaction, now finding him alone in his hotel office, "and have a proposition to make to you. The site I have decided upon in Oakdale is at present a two-mile long by half-mile wide swamp, which contains some available timber, hemlock and hackmatack. That can be cut this coming summer, but as the swamp is a quagmire, it's impossible to haul it out till winter. We shall, in the meantime, obtain a portable saw-mill, set it up below where the dam is to be, and as soon as timber can be hauled out, begin sawing this for our own use. You can submit to me a proposition for fifty wood choppers to go to work by August first, and as many more men suitable for digging and quarrying operations, a month later, where the dam is to be built. This location, I may say, is now covered by a fine growth of pine that must be cut first. Make your specification complete as to nationality of men to be furnished — any will do except Chinese, a foreman for each class of men must be included — terms and time of payment as well — also a bond for the good behavior of all men em-

ployed. Whoever obtains this contract must become responsible for all acts of thieving by men employed — we won't. This contract you can submit to us within a month, and if acceptable, we in turn will give you a bond for our fulfillment of same." And having thus baited his long-range trap, Stacy handed Otero his business card and shook hands with him cordially.

And that afternoon Stacy, well satisfied with what he had done, took the last train for Oakdale station, ten miles from that hamlet.

CHAPTER IX

IT was almost sunset when the old one-horse carryall, with Stacy as sole passenger, reached the hilltop overlooking Oakdale, and now its peculiar isolation, a village of perhaps fifty houses grouped around two churches with scattering ones adown the borders of the two enclosing ranges of mountains, appeared more sequestered than ever. From this viewpoint he now first noticed an oval hill back of the village with its serried rows of white and brown tombstones, the gorge to right of this out of which came Rocky Glen brook, the V-shaped vista of the valley beyond, with its winding creek and bordering ocean, while to left rose the bare-topped hill back of Uncle Asa's home, one of the two barricades beyond which lay Bear Hole Swamp. And just then, in spite of the charm of the peaceful vale and visions of the city that was to arise there, even in spite of the piquant little school-ma'am, whose home-roof Stacy now saw peeping above its surrounding maples, it occurred to him that the seldom-speaking old stage driver beside him

could be made to assist in the game of retribution he was about to play.

"You know that big swamp back of Uncle Asa's, don't you?" he said, now addressing him. "Well, there is a possibility you may sometime see that occupied by a big reservoir and below it a power house to produce electric light for Barre. If this comes about, and it may some day, there will be shops and factories built below that, alongside the valley, a trolley line to your railroad station, your village will have electric light, and then you won't have to drive this stage any more."

"Yew don't say so!" gasped the old man known as "Uncle Levi" who had been the connecting link between Oakdale village and station for twenty years. "Why, who's goin' to do it, 'n' when?"

"I won't say who or when," returned Stacy mysteriously, "only that it may come about — in time — that is all."

"Wal, that openin' back o' Uncle Asa's strikes me ez a handy spot fer a dam," responded Uncle Levi, now recovering himself. "Wal, wal, 'n' so thar's one goin' up thar, eh? You s'prise me! Who's goin' to dew it?"

"I didn't say anybody was — not yet," asserted Stacy in a you-mustn't-tell tone. "I only hint this

to you in confidence for I've — well, the land hasn't been bought yet and — you understand — keep quiet about it."

And he did, so quiet that not twenty-four hours elapsed before every man, woman, and child in Oakdale knew all about it, as Stacy intended that they should.

That evening also, or immediately after supper, he held another pertinent interview with Samuel Gates, Esq., landlord of the Oakdale House, that must be recorded.

"Do you know, Sam," he said to him in the indifferent way, typical of his business methods, when the chance came, "that I've — well, I've half a mind to make you an offer for that Rocky Glen Gorge you own; just to have a trout brook I could call my own? I wouldn't pay much for it; it's only a whim of mine, you know."

"Wal, ye kin fish it, I s'pose, any time ye want to," drawled Sam, glancing curiously at him. "The brook's thar, 'n' you're welcome."

"Yes, I know 'tis," responded Stacy in the same tone, "only if I owned it I could post it, and so keep away other fishermen. I am not particular. Would you be willing to lease it to me for that purpose for, say, ten years, and for how much?"

"I'VE HALF A MIND TO MAKE YOU AN OFFER FOR THAT ROCKY GLEN GORGE."—*Page 104.*

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"Why, I dunno," returned Sam slowly, "how much 'ud ye give?"

"Oh, maybe ten dollars a year," admitted Stacy indifferently, "just to make the matter binding. As you say, I know I am welcome to fish it — or Bear Hole Swamp brook any time I come here," and he laughed.

"That's so, sure," responded Sam, also joining in the laugh, "but — wal, make me an offer on the gorge brook land, 'n' I'll think it over."

"No, you set a price and I'll think it over. I am not anxious about buying it either. I just stopped off here for another day's fishing and shall leave to-morrow evening. I must get back to the city by the next day night." Then, and as if the matter were of small concern, he picked up a paper and began reading.

Not so with Sam, however. He, while shrewdly desiring to drive good bargains, considered this brook gorge, now stripped of its timber, as absolutely worthless, and anything received from it as so much gained.

"I dunno but I'd set a price on that 'ere brook gorge," he admitted finally after a long ten minutes of silence. "Thar's 'bout two hundred acres on't up to the top o' the pitch, 'n' a little scrub timber

that's wuth suthin. How'd six hundred strike ye?"

"Wal," drawled Stacy in exact imitation of Sam, "that's pretty stiff, all things considered. Does that include all the land down to the road?"

"Yas, 'n' some back on top o' the ridges, the hull piece is 'most a mile long."

For fully five minutes Stacy sat in contemplative silence, not to seem anxious, then spoke.

"I'll take it, Sam," he said finally, "and as I shall start fishing early in the morning, let us go over to your village Mogul, Squire Phinney, now, and have a deed filled out. If I sleep on it I shall most likely change my mind."

And thus did Stacy Whipple obtain possession of a piece of land that eventually became worth a thousand dollars for each one paid for it!

"One thing I must insist on," Stacy said after the deed was duly signed and witnessed, and he had given Sam six crisp one-hundred dollar bills for it — he had brought four times that sum with him — "and that is, you must keep still about this transaction. There is a big deal on foot to buy Bear Hole Swamp for a reservoir and power house later on; I shall probably have charge of the work and may have to board with you for a year or two. You will hear about it in the near future, but keep still,

or the deal may all fall through. This must absolutely be kept in strict confidence."

And having thus secured what he needed, and at the same time baited a trap for Curtis North, alias Pentecost Curtis, Stacy retired to a well-earned sleep.

He was up early next morning, and after a previously-ordered breakfast, betook himself to the home of Uncle Asa.

And now after a week's absence and many vivid recollections of her sweet face and dainty form, first seen under the big pine, her modest self-possession and perfect poise, her keen wit and ability to cope with him on any subject, and best of all her tender devotion to her father — the nearer he came to her moss-coated old rookery of a home, the more he felt like a bashful schoolboy making first call on a sweetheart. He also realized how rare and charming a maid, fit to grace a palace, was hid in this byway nook — "Hazel Dell," as he kept thinking of it.

Its utter seclusion at the end of a grass-grown lane out of sight of the main highway seemed suggestive of her perfect purity; as the flower-filled dooryard and lilac and syringa-hidden house did of her sweetness as he drew near it; and despite his years of contact with the world, his heart thumped

unduly when he lifted the iron knocker on the closed front door.

Much to his disgust, Martha answered it, greeted him with clumsy obsequiousness and invited him in.

"Uncle Asa's gone down the crick," she asserted in answer to his inquiry, "'n' Hazel's over to Mollie Bascom's for the day. She's got a cousin visitin' from Barre, 'n' they've a sorter lawn party goin' on this arternoon.

"I s'pose they'd be glad to hev you jine 'em," she added, "'n' ez ye've met the Bascom gal, it's all right."

"I should be more than glad to do so," returned Stacy, smiling at her idea of propriety, "but my errand here is to see Uncle Asa. Where can, or how can I find him? I had planned to go away this afternoon."

"Why, ye kin take his small boat 'n' go down the crick, if ye can't wait," she answered, eyeing him curiously. "No, I guess he took that," she added, "'n' you'll hev to take the big dory." And Stacy, departing much chagrined at this ill luck, wondered if this Bascom girl's cousin from Barre were of the masculine persuasion, felt sure that it must be, and was vexed accordingly. He was nothing to Hazel so far, as he fully realized, yet she was enough to him already so that if this comer from Barre were

a fellow, he wished that he would keep away from Oakdale. Oakdale swains were evidently not to be feared, but a young man from Barre, where Hazel had spent a winter in social gaiety, might prove a dangerous rival.

Uncle Asa's big dory was soon found to be out of water beside his small wharf. Stacy had a muddy experience in launching it under the hot sun, and by the time he started down stream on the last of the tide, his temper and raiment were both badly frayed.

And meantime the imagined face of the fellow from Barre kept intruding!

He reached the open water of the cove after two hours of misery, pulled up to the little old wharf, and soon, to his joy, saw Uncle Asa doubled over and digging clams on the bare flats outside.

"I'm glad to see ye, mighty glad," that worthy exclaimed, looking up as Stacy drew near and smiling benignly, "but what fetched ye back so soon, good news?"

"Yes, decidedly so for you if all goes as I plan," answered Stacy positively. "Come up to where the table is and I'll tell you the story."

Once seated there in shade more than consoling to Stacy, with the cooling sea breeze blowing in, he began his story, fully resolved to keep nothing back

from Uncle Asa, but to trust him fully, as he now did. He started at the beginning, too; telling of his mission to Oakdale, the reason for it, and what he had decided upon, next of his return to Barre with the outcome of the contract with that city's committee, and, most pertinent of all, of his meeting with Pentecost Curtis and the latter's tool, Otero, and of his almost certainty of the game they intended to play, with explanation of the trap set for them. And the face of Uncle Asa was a study while this recital was in progress, for his mouth was wide open, now and then he gasped for breath, and when Stacy paused, he jumped up, yelled "Hooray, Good Lord, hooray!" in tones that echoed across the wide cove, then grabbed both of Stacy's hands in his, and nearly pulled Stacy's arms out of their sockets.

"I'd kiss ye if ye wuz a woman, I swar I would!" he next exclaimed, now dancing up and down. "But I can't believe all you're tellin'! Good Lord, it's too good to be true! Ef it turns out so, it's Kingdom-Come fer me, sure's a gun! 'N' Hazel, say Hazel —" And overcome by the ecstasy of his joy Uncle Asa choked, sat down and covered his face with muddy hands while he shook with suppressed emotion.

And it was many moons ere Stacy forgot even

one iota of that mingling of humor and pathos in Uncle Asa's words.

"We must be slow and cautious in playing this game," Stacy now assured him in business tone. "We are up against two sharpers, keen as the devil, and as occult. This Otero, the tool, will come here in the near future — Curtis North never will — Otero will make a lot of sly inquiries, then call on you, make a few more, and maybe go away to consult with his backer and prime mover in this game. He will appear again and either make you a flat offer at a nominal figure for Bear Hole Swamp or try to secure an option on it. And here is where you come in! You must now assert that you already have an offer for the property by parties whose names, location, or intentions you have no knowledge of. Be as cocky and independent as a well-fed bulldog, and say positively you won't set any price on the swamp. Otero will then begin to bid up, and how high he will go all depends on your nerve, self-possession, and strength of assurance that you won't accept any offer. When he gets up to, say, six or seven thousand dollars, then begin to weaken in your refusals, and finally admit that for cash down — not even a certified check — you will accept an even ten thousand dollars for your property. He will then offer you a split price,

perhaps eight, perhaps nine thousand. You must next come the scornful act and say, 'Before I discuss this matter further, show me the coin.' He may go away again, he may not, most likely he will have the cash with him, but — get hold of the money before you give him even a scrap of paper, for you are dealing with a keen-witted thief. And once you get the money, hide it where no other human being can find it; then drive over to Barre — don't go by rail — and deposit your money in the best bank."

"Why, this feller must be a reg'lar highwayman!" gasped Uncle Asa after this elaborate plan of action. "You figger he'd hold me up 'tween here 'n' Barre!"

"He would, as sure's you're born, in disguise of course," responded Stacy, smiling at Uncle Asa's concern, and then he related what he had seen this Otero doing in the mining-camp gambling den. "Both of those fellows are despicable thieves," he added, "and would not hesitate at murder if need be.

"I am going to Nevada in a week or two," he continued, "and shall look this Rawhide swindle up, and perhaps obtain some evidence to give these sharpers a good scare anyhow. Enough to keep

them away from this vicinity at least. They are too cunning to be caught red-handed and landed in jail, I'm sure."

And now after this plan of action was mapped out, Uncle Asa began to ponder.

"I wish you wuz goin' ter be here 'n' do this business," he ejaculated with a sigh after a long pause. "It's askin' a good deal, Mr. Whipple, you've already done more fer me 'n' any man ever did, but — I don't feel I'm smart 'nuff to dicker with sich a dern scamp. 'N' it's Hazel's money, too, if I get it back out o' that wuthless swamp, 'n' — Good Lord, the chance seems like the hull o' my life!"

"I wish I could, Uncle Asa," Stacy returned earnestly, "and I assure you that I'd gladly do it if possible. I'd — I'd go a long way to do you a good turn, and repeat the trip for Hazel. She is — is the sweetest little lady I ever saw, bless her big eyes."

Then Uncle Asa looked up at Stacy curiously. "Say, Mr. Whipple," he queried, "kin I tell Hazel now what you've done, 'n' are doin'?"

"No, positively no," vehemently, "until the affair is all over and this swindler landed or not! Then you may."

And just now he wished more than for anything else in his life before, that if all worked out as he hoped, he might be an unobserved witness of Hazel's face, when her father informed her of the outcome.

CHAPTER X

MANY of us do kindly acts, a few do unselfish ones, but not one in a million ever does a heroic one without hope of reward.

In Stacy's case, what he had so far done was solely from good will and wish to help a kindly old man who had, metaphorically speaking, opened his arms to him on sight. Just an ebullition of generosity in the heart of a man grown cynical and hard by contact with a heartless and selfish world. His own father — much the same kind of man, as Stacy recalled him — also played a part in this generous impulse, and woven into it, also, was Hazel's face. Stacy desired no reward from her except the indirect one of repaying her coolness — almost scorn — by an act of unselfish interest in her father's welfare. He also had a lurking suspicion of the real cause of her chilly demeanor; that she distrusted him or imagined his real errand here was a sinister one, and his interest in her father similar to that of the swindler, North, and finally to inveigle him into some financial scheme. There must

be some reason for her apparent distrust; this seemed the most plausible one.

And now after this heart-to-heart exchange with Uncle Asa, in the tiny grove overlooking that lone sea beach, it occurred to Stacy that time was flying, and if he caught the late afternoon train it was time to be starting.

"I've got to catch the six-thirty train west," he now said to Uncle Asa, consulting his watch, "and must be going. I've told you all I can regarding this plan of mine, and all I can add is, Keep quiet, don't confide a word of it — not even to Hazel, and when this Otero shows up — as I am sure he will — drive a good bargain with him."

"It's a case o' 'Do unto the other feller ez he'd do unto you, only do it fust,' I cal'late," returned Uncle Asa, chuckling. "Only I wisht you was the one to do it. You've fergot more'n I ever knew 'bout handlin' sich swindlers.

"We must hev suthin to eat 'fore we start back," he continued, glancing at the sun. "I've got a coffee pot 'n' briler in my boat, 'n' a little lunch. I'll jist make some coffee 'n' brile a couple o' lobs, 'n' then I'll pull ye up the crick in my small boat. I wish ye cud stop over 'nother night with us?" he added pleadingly. "I'd be proud to hev ye 'n' Hazel — say, Mr. Whipple, can't I jist gin her a

hint o' what's in the wind so she kin 'preciate ye ez she ought? That gal's clus-mouthed, 'n' got more sense in a minnit than I've got in a month, if she is my darter."

"No, I thank you for the invitation, Uncle Asa," responded Stacy earnestly, "but you must not confide my real errand here to her. Positively, you must not now." Then he — reading Uncle Asa's wish and thoughts as easily as a child's — added another heart-confidence that made the old man gasp.

"Uncle Asa," he said slowly and as uttering a prayer, "I have said to myself for many years — I am thirty now — that I would never marry, and yet during the ten days since I first saw your daughter under the pine tree, and from my reading of her mind and character, if she were to give me the slightest encouragement now, I just couldn't help asking her to become my wife. She won't, however. She either doesn't like me, or distrusts me, and that is my inmost reason for refusing to let you confide my errand here to her. It would make her feel obligated to me, and I wouldn't accept even a smile from her won that way. Now you have my measure!"

Then once more Uncle Asa extended his hand, swallowed a lump, and turned his face away.

"Mr. Whipple," he answered with a tremor, "you've teched my heart ez nothin' ever teched it since my wife died. Ef I kin bring things 'bout ez I wish 'em, it'll all come out right in the end. Hazel jist can't help trustin' ye, 'n' a good deal more when she knows what I know 'bout ye. Leave it to me, leave it to me, 'n' take keer o' yerself while ye're away."

And Stacy felt as if he had already offered his hand and heart to this rare maiden and was awaiting her answer.

But he would not have told her of what he hoped to do now, even if that withholding were to part them forever, for that was his pride and way. It must be himself she wanted, for himself alone, and not as compensation for any favor shown her father.

"We must hurry about this dinner matter," he now said, again consulting his watch. "It's half-past twelve; it will take us over an hour to pull up the creek even with the tide, the stage leaves at four-thirty, and there you are!"

"I kin pull up in less'n 'n hour," asserted Uncle Asa confidently. "I will, anyhow, 'n' then I'll hitch up 'n' take ye to the depot myself. My hoss kin go faster'n Uncle Levi's old crowbait."

The broiled lobsters and coffee were speedily

made ready by Uncle Asa. He cooked three of those delicious crustaceans lest his honored guest would not find one enough, melted butter in a tin cup, and served Stacy as if he were a titled personage. Once started, Uncle Asa swung the oars with long, vigorous strokes while Stacy steered, the sea breeze followed them cool, crisp, and refreshing, scores of bobolinks rose from the marsh on either hand, caroling their wondrously sweet song, and somehow, just now, it seemed to find an echo in Stacy's heart.

When the boathouse was reached Stacy suggested that he walk on to the hotel, pay his bill, and await Uncle Asa there, and did so.

And now arriving at the village, he was the observer of a scene that effectually ended the bobolink-song mood within him, and thrust a tiny dagger into his heart. He knew that Hazel was spending the day with one of her girl chums. He had no expectation of seeing her, no intention, certainly, of spying upon her; yet now, passing close to a big brown shrubbery-surrounded house near the village, there in a shaded hammock sat Miss Hazel picking at her banjo, and in the opposite end a sprucely dressed young man!

One instant's flash of her big brown eyes came to Stacy with a cool little nod. He bowed, raised

his hat courteously, glanced just once at the half-dozen other young folk grouped about and strode on feeling as if all the world were awry.

And that was the last time that he saw Miss Hazel for many months.

The Old Guard, with two additions, were lined up in the hotel piazza chairs when Stacy reached it, Sam in their midst, and from their curious glances and animated faces it was evident that some unusual happening had disturbed their minds. Sam greeted Stacy with unusual deference; Stacy explained to him later in the office that Uncle Asa had been unable to take him fishing as he had hoped, paid his bill, and to protect himself from a quizzing from Sam, remained in his room until he saw Uncle Asa nearing the hotel, then descended, shook hands with Sam and rode away with Uncle Asa.

And never before since that Old Guard made Sam's piazza their summer rendezvous or gathered around his open Franklin stove in winter, had a visitor come and gone who had excited them as much as Stacy had, or whom they so longed to question!

"Thar's the devil 'n' Tom Walker to pay," asserted Sam the moment Stacy rode away, "'n' Uncle Asa's in the game, I cal'late. Fust, that feller comes here 'n' ketches on with him, they go fishin',

go down the crick with Hazel 'n' a couple o' other gals fer a clam-boil, he calls thar a few times, goes off, comes back, tells Uncle Levi, Bear Hole Swamp's goin' to be turned into a big reservoir some day, shops put up, 'n' doin's o' all sorts. Then he comes back like he dropped outen the clouds, tells me he wants Rocky Glen brook fer a trout brook o' his own, pays me six hundred cold plunks fer it like they war waste paper, 'n' goes off mum ez a clam. Either thar's a nigger in the woodpile, or that chap's crazy ez a loon."

For two hours, also, or until supper time, this epitome of Stacy's actions formed the Old Guard's sole topic of converse, with varying opinions as to whether he were a sane millionaire, or a lunatic with money to burn — the latter predominating.

Arriving at Oakdale depot — an isolated spot with woods all about and the only house in sight that of the station agent — Stacy, to enjoy his cigar and privacy with Uncle Asa, asked that they await the train in their carryall near the station; and here he once more went over the manner and method by which Uncle Asa was to do his part in forcing restitution of his money by sale of a worthless swamp to Otero, pal and tool of Curtis North.

"You must be sly, 'devilish sly,' Uncle Asa," Stacy cautioned him, "for you will be dealing with

a fellow that I've no doubt has committed every crime in the calendar and escaped the law so far. The one point most effective will be your convincing him it's your sense of honor that keeps you from accepting any offer — as he has no honor, he will not easily believe you have — and convincing him of this will be the turning point in making him believe that he is safe in buying this property. He will hear that I have bought the Rocky Glen gorge — I dare not leave that uncovered — only — and I have paved the way for it — he will hear all about the big deal on hand to buy Bear Hole Swamp before he calls on you, and your positive refusal to sell until after a long parley, and big price offered, will be the convincing proof that he is buying what we want for a reservoir."

"It's a cut-throat game, 'n' I ain't used to 'em," declared Uncle Asa, "but I'll do the best I kin. I dunno's it's quite right to take more'n the four thousand this North skinned me outen, though. It don't seem so."

"But you've actually got to sell Bear Hole Swamp," returned Stacy positively. "It will be worth double ten thousand dollars as soon as our power starts its wheels, and then you deserve some return for the distress of mind you have suffered. Don't have any compunctions of conscience, Uncle

Asa. The money this swindler will put in was practically stolen by him, some of it actually, no doubt, so rest easy in your mind."

When the train was heard coming, Uncle Asa jumped out hurriedly, hitched his horse, grasped Stacy's suit-case and led the way to the station platform.

"Good-bye, 'n' God bless ye, Mr. Whipple, God bless ye," he said, when the final moment of parting came; "'n' say, I'd give five years o' my life, 'n' I hain't many left, to tell Hazel now so she — she could be thinkin' ez I do 'bout ye. Mebbe ye'll write me from the West, 'n' I kin hev Hazel answer. My writin's a good deal like crow-tracks in the mud."

And once away, it dawned on Stacy that this last proposal was an occult one to make Hazel realize that he was the honorable man Uncle Asa believed him to be — also a possible hope of something beyond of mutual benefit.

Another conclusion also came to him as the train sped on, which was that if his trap caught this swindler and he found what he felt sure of finding in Rawhide, he would set another, either to land him in jail, or make him give up the deed of Uncle Asa's swamp; all of which must be accepted as further proof of Stacy's penchant for air castles.

CHAPTER XI

"WELL, old man, what success?" questioned Bert Colby, Stacy's genial, hustling partner, when he entered their office thirty-six hours later and after the usual handshake. "Did you land Barre all right?"

"Yes, got contracts all signed and witnessed and went back to Oakdale and bought the best dam site there for six hundred," returned Stacy tersely, "and had a heap of fun besides. Say, my boy," he added smiling, "Oakdale's a dream of a spot for trout fishing, but the hotel would give you dyspepsia, with a table maid that chews gum while serving."

"How about your Uncle Reuben, the nice old farmer who took you fishing, and his peach of a girl?" smiled Bert. "I guess she's the one who added charm to the brooks. Did she?" —

"No, she doesn't chew gum," interrupted Stacy. "She's the finest and keenest country girl I ever saw."

"Stung, my boy, stung, good and plenty," laughed Bert, "and by the way, here's the layout of

the gold brick your Uncle Rube bought," and he handed Stacy a long official envelope.

Stacy glanced at its corner caption, "Carson City Bureau of Mining Statistics," then drew forth its missive.

Briefly stated, it gave the information that the Rawhide Gold Mining and Reduction Company had been duly organized under the laws of Nevada; capital two hundred thousand dollars, divided into twenty thousand shares, par value ten dollars; President Curtis North, Secretary and Treasurer Leon Otero, both of Rawhide; directors, these two with three other names given, from Deadwood, Colorado. A footnote added was to the effect that owing to failure to give annual report and non-payment of State tax, the said charter had been adjudged as forfeited.

For fully five minutes Stacy studied this plain statement of facts, stroking his brown, well-kept mustache meanwhile — an unusual act for him — then ejaculated, "No chance to catch him in Nevada, anyhow."

"Catch whom?" queried his partner curiously. "Have you added the sleuthing business to ours?"

"No," replied Stacy, "but I've set out to catch one slick swindler to help Uncle Asa out of a hole."

Then Colby — for they were in the seclusion of their private office — exploded in a burst of laughter!

"Well, you are worse than stung," he exclaimed, subsiding, "you are bit, scooped, done for, landed, and all within ten days! You called the turn! Uncle Rube's daughter must be a winner! But what the devil do you want to chase a bunco man out to Nevada for? Does she make that a provision?"

"No, she hasn't even grown to believe I am honest yet," returned Stacy soberly. "Thinks I came to Oakdale to sell her father more mine stock, or on some swindling game. There is a more dangerous snake in the grass in this case, than the one that charmed Mother Eve."

Then Stacy gave his partner, who was like a brother to him, a full and explicit account of his visit to Oakdale and Barre, his meeting with Curtis North and Otero, with an exposure of their supposed plot, and a description of the trap he had set for them. Hazel, of course, came in as a side light in this drama — for she was too much in Stacy's mind to be omitted — and her charm, keen wit, and filial devotion were touched upon by him. "It's to save her poor little heritage and comfort her father

— one of Nature's noblemen — that I've taken a hand in this game," Stacy then explained. "She is a rare girl, and while I'm not in love with her yet, the only way I'll escape that malady is to keep away from Oakdale. A month there and I'd be a goner!"

"Well then, hike to Oakdale at once, for you might easily do a bigger fool thing," asserted Colby in response — for he had a charming wife, home, and two children. "In fact, as there are scores of La Rosa Carmens abroad in the land, if this country lass is half what you describe, I'll blow a cool five hundred on a wedding present for you two, and call it money well spent."

"Thanks, old man," returned Stacy soberly, "you may have the chance if I am obliged to superintend our work in Oakdale. And now how about my trip West you wrote me about? What's to be done?"

"Why, first, you must see two parties in New York, buying agents who want some of our Number One Compressed Air Drillers, about a hundred I expect, then you will have to go to Nevada and on to Seattle to see mine owners and take measurements. It's going to delay our Oakdale work some, but can't help it. This Drill order has too much pie

in it to put off, and I can't leave here, anyhow." And so Stacy once more found himself in business harness after the charm of Oakdale.

That evening also, in the cozy seclusion of his own house and sitting-room, and just for fun, he gave his aunt a "big, big jolly," as he would put it.

"Aunt Carrie," he said soberly, when the chance came, "you have for many years advised that the proper thing for me to do was to get married and give you a companion to help watch and take care of your pets, also me. Well, I found the perfect one ten days ago, a country lass who wears a calico sunbonnet, can milk the cows, I imagine, and makes the most delightful shortcake that ever melted in a man's mouth. She also plays the banjo and sings coon songs like an artist. How would it strike you if I brought her here in September?"

"Mercy!" gasped his aunt as visions of a farmer's freckled daughter who said "haow" and "Yew don't tell!" flashed into her mind. "Do you mean it, Stacy, do you? Why I — I never supposed such a girl would suit you?"

Then Stacy laughed heartily.

"I didn't say she suited me exactly," he returned, still chuckling, "but you can dress her up so the 'tater bugs won't chase her any more, I think she can get her feet into number seven shoes — eights,

anyhow — you can check her propensity to chew gum during divine service and exclaim 'Land's sake!' and 'Laws-a-massy!' too often in company, and so get along with her. I am doing this to please you, Aunt Carrie."

Then his aunt eyed him curiously, for she was not as credulous as may be imagined. "I know you are joking," she said, smiling benignly (like Uncle Asa, as Stacy thought), "but I hope you will marry, and I know a country girl will make you a good wife. They are always good and sensible. You know what I think of city girls — vain and frivolous, if not fast."

Then, and to ease the mind of this most excellent woman — country born — who had been practically a mother to him for eighteen years, Stacy gave her a truthful description of Hazel and her charms. And it is needless to add that his aunt exclaimed over this possible outcome as all country mothers would.

Another development, more pertinent to this narrative than its love interest came to Stacy during the week that now elapsed before he left Albion again, that must be related. There was in his office a young man about his age, a boyhood schoolmate in the way-back town Stacy came from, and a sensible, keen-witted fellow, whom he had taken in

hand years before, by the name of Isaac Williams. He had been observant, anxious to learn, was a good penman, and was now head bookkeeper for the firm; also devoted to Stacy personally as was natural.

"I overheard something last night in a café, Mr. Whipple," he said to him early one morning (the fourth since his return from Oakdale) "that I think you ought to know." As Colby had not arrived and this might be confidential, Stacy at once invited "Ike," as he was called, into the private office, and told him to go ahead.

"I was at the show last night — Park Square Theater," continued Ike, "with a girl I take out occasionally, and afterwards took her to the Jap Garden's café for lunch. It's a nice, cozy one, with music, and little stalls with paper partitions and bamboo curtains — you know the place — and it's all right. Well, as we were going in I noticed a couple in the stall next to the one we took, and the fellow, a slick little Spanish-looking sort of a chap, was just giving his order to the waiter, so the curtain was up, and the lady with him was that Miss Carmen I know you used to take to theaters occasionally. Well, we hadn't been seated five minutes — I'd just given my order — when I overheard your name mentioned by this Miss Carmen, and I began to listen. She was talking low and mysterious. I

couldn't catch all that was said, but the point of it was this chap had just come from Barre where he had gone to work some scheme or upset your plans and was sure of doing it. She admitted, too, that she was next to one of the committee there also, or he had been here to see her and told her what was afoot. I judged by one admission of hers that she was pretty intimate with this Barre chap or had some hold on him. I also heard her say to this fellow, 'Now remember, I am to have a mate to the diamond bracelet from you when the trick is done — no go-back, or I'll peach,' and he said, 'My dear, it ees promised, I haf kept my vord and I vill.' I heard some love talk mixed in later, and kissing with it. He is to take her to the Park Square to-night also. The game they had or were putting up is one you best know, I thought."

"Most certainly," returned Stacy, "and I thank you for your fidelity. Now I want you to go with me to the Park Square to-night. We will keep apart and watch out. I think I know who the fellow is, but it's best that we are not seen together." Then the bookkeeper returned to his duties, and Stacy to a mental kicking of himself for sundry and divers reasons.

"'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,'" he muttered, pulling at his mustache again, "and she

has got it in for me! And to think I once thought her so glorious, and was on the point of proposing! I ought to have her picture framed as Sam did the certificate, to prove how many kinds of damn fool I was! And she nothing but a despicable adventuress, and worse!" Then he arose and began to pace the office while he digested this new complication and how to use it. He had at first only meant to rescue Uncle Asa's money with good interest — now he was so angry that he determined to jail both these swindlers, cost what it might.

"I wonder if I couldn't get you sent up for a year or two, Miss La Rosa Carmen, just for luck," he now soliloquized, "if I put a detective on your trail?" Then better sense came to him. "No, you idiot," he asserted, thinking of himself, "better by far go hug a busy buzz saw than to try games on a woman like her!"

He kept both his own cogitations and the bookkeeper's disclosure from his partner, who came in later, for obvious reasons, and that evening he and Ike met early and stationed themselves for a sly observance of the theater's arriving patrons from outside its entrance. Stacy was in due time rewarded, for just before curtain time a carriage halted in front of the theater, Jehu opened its door obsequiously, out stepped Otero in evening dress,

top coat, crush hat, and holding a big bouquet, and after him "La Rosa Carmen," resplendent with many diamonds and the very latest in modish raiment.

Stacy had not seen her for four years or cared to for six; did not even know whether she had been in the city all that time or not — she was merely an episode in his past life that he wished to forget — yet now as she swept by within ten feet of where he stood in shadow, she was an undeniably handsome woman, not looking a year older since seen by him, in fact bewitchingly beautiful.

"She's a Juno in form and face, a Circe at heart, with soul of a she-devil," he said to himself now, "yet scores of men will pursue and pay any price for her Judas kisses — damn her!" which profane sneer can easily be excused, or should be.

"I should think she'd feel ashamed to be seen with that insignificant little pup," he added, now turning to find Ike, "but what do they care so long as the price is paid? Another diamond bracelet to do me, eh? Well, we will see! 'Whoever laughs last, laughs longest,' Bert says."

He had seen all he wanted and obtained all he wanted, namely, confirmation of who was with her in the café, and not wishing to be seen by this woman, when Ike was found the two hurried away.

"Come, Ike, my boy," Stacy now said in comradeship tone, and grasping his arm, "let's you and I have a drink in memory of boyhood days, then I'll tell you something, for I'm sure I can trust you. Just a long claret lemonade up in one corner of the Alhambra roof garden."

And here and thus ensconced in cool seclusion Stacy did tell him something, which was the history of his heart affair with La Rosa Carmen and its denouement in her obtaining inside information of Barre's intentions, then selling it to this probable paramour, Otero, for one diamond bracelet, with some of the spoils probably, and the mate to that for later pay. He also told of the trap he had set.

"Colby knows about Carmen," he admitted in conclusion, "but he doesn't know what I've told you, that she never was anything to me especially, for I believed her a good girl, while she — well, she really meant to marry me, so set out to play the innocent game of course. I just had to tell someone the facts to take the taste of her out of my mouth. Colby doesn't, or I don't want him to know of the game she has set up — he has worries enough — so you mustn't tell him. Keep still about all I've said. I may want to send you to Oakdale or to New York later on to play spy on this Curtis North. I intend to land him in jail if I can." Then, after another

of the cooling mixtures absorbed through straws, the two shook hands, and Stacy went home.

Next day, or the one before he was to leave Albion, a better mood came, for Hazel's face was in it, and in his heart as well. He also wondered what gift or token of it he could now send her — the usual way of a man in love. This, however, he had hard work to determine. Books and flowers were the only things admissible according to his calendar, the latter of course out of the question, so he betook himself to a bookstore. Six *de luxe* copies of the best poets with as many more of current fiction were here selected, then Stacy thought of her auto-harp and banjo and hastened away to a music dealer's, with the result that enough music for those two instruments to last her two years, together with the books, was soon on its way to Miss Hazel Webster, Oakdale.

Stacy didn't even enclose his card — just sent the things and let her guess from whom they came.

And now having done so much to assuage his wee little heart hunger for this " rare and radiant maiden named "— Hazel, the six weeks' jaunt and twice across this continent now seemed an interminably long time to be away.

CHAPTER XII

WITH the feeling that he must keep his coat buttoned tightly to protect his watch and pocketbook, and a firm hold of his suit-case — an impression that always came the moment he set foot in New York — Stacy pushed and elbowed his way through the Grand Central Depot, took a carriage to the Holland House, secured a room, and proceeded at once to Number 441 West Twenty-third Street. He found it a brownstone front and dingy brick lodging house in the Tenderloin borders with "Rooms to let" card in one window.

"Is Mr. Leon Otero in?" he asked of the mulatto maid who answered his ring.

"No, sah," she returned, eyeing him sharply.

"Can you tell me where I can find him?" Stacy next inquired suavely. "It's a matter of important business."

"No, sah; Ah dunno, sah," came from her of brick-color face. "He done been gone away mos' free weeks now, sah."

"Is Mr. Curtis rooming here?" Stacy next

hazarded. Then the maid flashed him another snaky look from her black eyes.

"He don't lib here," she admitted hesitatingly, "you kin find him at his office, Ah 'spect."

"Well, I wish to find either Mr. Otero or him," asserted Stacy anxiously, "on a matter of urgent business. Where is the office of Mr. Curtis?"

"In de Mills Building on Wall Street," she hesitated. "Ah doan 'member de number, sah. What am youah name, sah?"

"My name's Williams," returned Stacy briskly, "and I wanted to see Mr. Otero about hiring some men of him. I will try to see Mr. Curtis. Good morning." And having obtained more information than he expected, he bowed politely and turned away.

"Office on Wall Street, eh, you whiskered scoundrel!" he muttered when well away from this house. "So it's big game you are still after! Wonder if the office of the Rawhide Mine is there?"

He hurried up the street, almost ran up the nearest elevated railway stairs, caught a down-town train, and was soon at the Mills sky-scraper, Number 35 Wall Street.

Here and glancing over its office list, "Room 210, Floor 22, Curtis & Company," soon rewarded him.

Then he hesitated, for he had no wish to meet this arch-villain now, in fact that was the very thing he did not want to do yet. It was possible to do a little more sleuthing, however, so he caught an express elevator car and was shot up to Floor Twenty-two in a jiffy. Here, with hands in pockets like a farmer, he strolled leisurely down the corridor. Room 210 was easily found, Stacy glanced up and down the corridor, saw no one was observing him, then sidled up to the door upon the ground glass panel of which was lettered, "Curtis & Company. Mining Stocks and Investment Securities," and listened. No sound came from within, so he next turned the door knob cautiously and found the door locked.

"So the bird's away," he muttered, now strolling on, "and all the better." He kept on, also, around three divisions of this corridor until he saw a brass-buttoned young Irishman with appearance of janitorship, and him he accosted.

"Do you know a man named Curtis — big fellow, red face, white side-whiskers, dealer in mine stocks, on this floor?" he queried.

"Yis, sor; Room Two-ten, jist around two corners, sor," came the direct answer from Pat.

"I tried that door," returned Stacy, "but nobody in. How long since you have seen Mr. Curtis?"

"I can't say, sor; a wake or two I'm thinkin'. He don't be here much, sor." And having thus located those two slick schemers, Stacy left the building. His business in the city consumed three days, each evening of which was passed at some theater, and somehow every moment of those many hours of hurrying hither and yon Stacy's eyes were continually on watch for the conspicuous face of Curtis. He looked carefully around or over theater audiences for this peculiar face; also, and meantime, in spite of important business matters to be discussed and keen men to be bargained with, he kept wondering whether or not, just now, this fellow, Otero, was playing gallant to the Carmen siren or had gone to Oakdale. He was glad when the time came for leaving New York also; that city always oppressed him with a vague sense of uneasiness; and when once on board a through Western train of all Pullmans it seemed as if he were escaping from an enemy's country.

And now with three days and nights of luxurious ease ahead, two late novels in his suit-case, two boxes of his favorite cigars, also, and time to think; he began a more coherent plan or outline of how to circumvent these two conspirators. It would depend a good deal upon what he learned in Rawhide, however, for it was evident Curtis North had ob-

literated himself as much as possible and was now the well-to-do semi-retired business man, Pentecost Curtis, fat and prosperous, with a Wall Street office scarcely used except for an address. He didn't live on Twenty-third Street, not he! That was good enough for Otero, his pal, or maybe as a spare burrow wherein to hide in case of necessity. Stacy's reception by the mulatto maid of Number 441 now also seemed in line with his surmises, and her curious reticence and brusque demand for his name to be evidence that she had been duly cautioned. It was probable, also, that Curtis North had severed all connection with his Rawhide mine, would act virtuously indignant if even called its former president, and as Pentecost Curtis would disclaim all knowledge of that swindle. And now with so much of this web of trickery and assumed name thought out, it occurred to Stacy — the skeptic, air-castle builder, and shrewd business man combined — that in this obliteration of a scamp from his former rascalities was an opening to give that arch-villain at least a severe scare. Then, and following this conclusion, came the possibility of another bold stroke. In case Uncle Asa sold Bear Hole Swamp to Otero, confederate of Curtis North, alias P. Curtis, of forcing this swindler to give up the deed or face legal consequences.

"By Jove, I'll do it if I can," Stacy exclaimed, now springing to his feet in his private compartment of the on-rushing train; and then as the comical side of his plot and plan occurred to him, he laughed long and heartily.

"I wonder what Uncle Asa will say if I do," he added, subsiding, "and Hazel! Also Sam, who thought he had so good a joke on me? If I do, I'll buy that certificate of him as a souvenir!"

Then this builder of air-castles leaped back to Maple Dell in thought and to the cool yet sweet and bewitching maid who dwelt there. He also wondered what she would say or think of his gift of books and music, and how it was that she was so distrustful of him on sight? He was now satisfied that her coolness was all due to her imagining him there to inveigle her confiding father, and this, perhaps, more than all else, now inspired him to, as he would say, "do that shrewd, slick swindler, Curtis."

"I'll drop one tiny hot coal on her pretty head," he again muttered with a smile, and then, as if smiles are never long with us, his thoughts reverted to the last time he saw Miss Hazel in the hammock with a citified gallant no doubt saying all sort of sweet things to her; whereat, it is needless to say, his smile vanished.

Three days is a long time to a busy man who

has only his always active mind with books and cigars for company; and to Stacy, with many things to vex him besides, these three seemed interminable, and the two thorns in the flesh were Hazel's cool indifference, and the fear that Uncle Asa would fail to land this Otero as Stacy had instructed him, and so nullify all chance of obtaining justice.

"Uncle Asa's too honest to cope with such villains," Stacy said to himself, recalling his benign face with its enclosing fringe of white beard like a halo. "He judges all mankind by himself, and will get left in this diamond-cut-diamond game."

It was four A. M. when Stacy's train halted at a small station where a branch line ran up to Rawhide, and the only other victim of an unseemly time-table was a middle-aged man of vigorous build, short-cropped black beard, and wearing a broad, light-gray slouched hat, who alighted from another car. Of course the two bowed and smiled at one another as perforce they must, and Stacy, noticing that the other wore a Mystic Shrine pin, was first to speak.

"I see you have — — —," he said, quoting the usual hailing words of that Order, and extending his hand.

"I have — — —," returned the other cordially,

also offering his, and so mutual good fellowship was established on the instant.

And never before was Stacy more glad that he belonged to that Order than now.

"My name's Harkins, Jim Harkins," this man next added, "and bound for Rawhide. I live there."

"And mine's Whipple from down east," Stacy returned. "I, too, am going up to Rawhide," and then he looked around. The station, a long one-story building labeled "Rawhide Junction," and divided into Wells-Fargo Express Office, baggage and waiting-room, with barn and one dwelling back of it, he recalled from his visit over six years previous; two other abodes and a small store had been added since, and beside the old stage road up into the mountains lay a narrow-gauge railroad. The sun was just reddening the mountains that seemed to rise one above another bare-topped, two of the most distant were snow-capped, and so clear the air and so silent this long narrow valley that the rumble of the departing train now miles away returned distinctly, even to the hiss of escaping steam.

"We've got over two hours to wait for the east-bound train and ours up to Rawhide," Harkins next asserted after Stacy had obtained his bearings.

"I've a couple of sandwiches and flask in my grip, will you join me in a bite and sup? It's no breakfast till we get to Rawhide about nine, if we have good luck."

And so this keen-eyed, shrewd-spoken man made friends, and at once won the good will and confidence of the equally keen-witted Stacy. The latter was, however, disposed to be cautious regarding the nature of his errand here.

"I was up at this Rawhide camp about seven years ago," he admitted casually after the one-sandwich lunch in the empty waiting-room. "It has grown some since then, I presume."

"You will hardly know it," returned Harkins directly. "Then it was one of the roughest of mining camps without law or order, now we have good public buildings, a bank, hotels, and electric lights — a remarkable growth in that time."

"You are a resident there, or in business, I assume?" came next from Stacy, who always sought facts by circuitous routes.

"I was super of a mine when you were there, I am marshal now," answered Harkins modestly.

And then a sudden thrill of satisfaction came to Stacy, for this was indeed good luck.

"And did you happen to hear of or come in contact with a chap by the name of Curtis North about

the time you were mine super?" queried Stacy cautiously.

"Oh, yes, I knew all about him," responded Harkins, flashing a sharp glance at Stacy. "A big, red-faced, white-whiskered, pompous cuss, and bad lot combined. He started a fake mine scheme there but got into some trouble and left 'tween two days. He and a pal of his, a low-down Greaser they used to call Skim; Otero was his name. They and a pair of women from 'Frisco done up a couple of miners from Humpback Camp further up, and lit out that night with the loot — or what the women didn't share. One of these miners was found dead in the shack the women had occupied, but they vanished before the murder was discovered."

"But why weren't this North and his pal pursued, captured, and strung up?" inquired Stacy. "Was no evidence of the crime obtainable?"

"Oh, plenty, but there wasn't much law in Rawhide just then and nobody took the matter up. These two miners were doped, it was believed, by the women; one got a cracked skull in the round-up, the other came to the next afternoon and told the story. There was a watch fob belonging to this whiskered chap found in the hut, also, a buffalo head of solid gold; I've got it at home."

For fully five minutes Stacy pondered over this

brief yet pertinent bit of mining-camp history — ordinary items in such a gathering of lawless humanity, yet the very facts he wanted or had hoped to find — before he decided what to say or ask for next. This fellow, Harkins, while a brother Mason and likely to be all right and on the square, was yet a stranger. He might be discreet, and he might not. Good fellowship and "on-the-squareness" didn't always carry discretion as Stacy well knew, and he had come a thousand miles out of his way to obtain facts and set a trap for one of the shrewdest swindlers! Caution was almost obligatory now, and he had it in ample degree.

"You spoke of a fake mining scheme started by this whiskered chap," he said finally; "what was it?"

"Oh, just the ordinary kind," laughed Harkins, as if such things were a joke, "and to skin the newcomers, the tenderfoots. This fellow North and his pal, the Greaser, got hold of an abandoned mine up the gulch, just a hole in the bank some fool had dug — that is they obtained the government patent on the claim — bought a few secondhand tools and set a couple of men to blasting, and the next I heard had organized the Rawhide Gold Mining and Reduction Company, capital two hundred thousand dollars. They didn't even try to sell stock in Raw-

hide — the boys were onto the game there — only this North took trips away, gone a month or so, then back again, while Skim sorter waited 'round and bossed the two men blasting. When his pard, as I always counted this North, returned, they were in some one of the poker games on every night and usually all night. It might have been six months, might be a year — we don't keep tabs on time overmuch in a mining camp — after the two men were set at work blasting in what we all knew was a no-good mine, when this North gazoo brought these two women to Rawhide, and a tough pair they were, too! One was known, I heard later, as 'Bricktop Molly' and — well, you know the game such fairies play, and a lawless mining camp is just their sort of pasture. Anyhow these two kicked up quite a rumpus in Rawhide, then skinned out in the nick o' time to save themselves a coat of tar and new feathers."

"Could this 'Bricktop Molly' be found now?" interposed Stacy.

"I guess so," laughed Harkins, eyeing him curiously, "such a red head as hers couldn't be hid in Nevada."

"I might need her for a witness," Stacy returned slowly, "or a make-believe one." Then he arose and extended his hand to Harkins.

And then came a meeting of those two extended hands that inch by inch resolved itself into a clasp, the sacredness and obligation of which needs no words among true Masons the world over. A clasp or grip, by the way, that once exchanged between such binds each to the other in loyal aid and assistance as naught else can.

"And now, Brother Harkins," continued Stacy, after the two sat down again, "I'm going to tell you who I am, and what I'm after here."

And tell he did, or at least all that would now interest Harkins, or pertained to the trap to catch Pentecost Curtis and pal, Otero, and bring them to justice.

"I don't really want the bother of a court trial to jail them," admitted Stacy after this disclosure. "I do mean to obtain such evidence as will make North or Curtis give up the deed of this Bear Hole Swamp — I assume he has now obtained or soon will obtain from this Uncle Asa — and gladly, too, to escape the law. Also, give him such a scare that he will give Oakdale and Barre both a wide berth forever after."

"I guess we can," asserted Harkins, while a meaning smile spread over his face. "I'll do what I can to help you, and that is some. The boys at Rawhide will back me in anything, even a lynching

now, for since I took the marshalship I've driven out a good many bad characters we hadn't room for."

"I'm willing to pay all expenses," admitted Stacy in response, "and liberally. I may also want you to come East and serve a warrant on Curtis North, alias Pentecost Curtis; possibly bring this miner who lived to tell the tale of that night's orgie, robbery and murder of his companion, and with that full hand of scare cards we might add an affidavit from this 'Bricktop Molly,' if she can be found and frightened into giving one."

"I don't believe you will need all that hand," responded Harkins. "North will know me the moment he sets eyes on me, a warrant and my badge will do the trick in short order; if not, the buffalo head watch fob flashed at the right moment will add an ace that will convince him I hold the winning cards."

And then once more these two men, brothers now in the cause of justice, shook hands.

Another hour was passed in social chat with more cigars to add fraternalism, then the station agent made his appearance, said "Hullo Jim" to Harkins, the east-bound train came along and dropped a half-dozen passengers, the narrow-gauge train backed up, its conductor said "All aboard for Raw-

hide," and then for another hour Stacy watched out the car window and chatted with Harkins, while their train crawled up the narrow mountain gorge to that once lawless camp and hatchery of a swindle, and now prosperous mining town of Rawhide.

CHAPTER XIII

HAZEL'S home life, or relation with her stepmother, was even more unpleasant than Stacy imagined, and all that made her endure it was love for her father, and loyalty to him. To begin with, the Widow Baker, as Sam had informed Stacy, was a Tartar and miser combined, and to obtain and hoard money her sole ambition in life. She had, when Hazel was twelve years old, and two years after her mother's death, begun a deliberate assault upon Uncle Asa's feelings and sympathy with all the arts of a designing woman, and more from a false belief that Hazel needed a mother's care than from any feeling for her he had capitulated, so to speak, and installed her as mistress of his ancient and lonesome abode. It was an unwise step, as he soon discovered, but the deed was done, the knot tied, and as he once admitted to himself, "arter the hook's in, it's in, 'n' derned hard work to git it out agin." He saw no way to do so in this case, and, as was his nature, set about making the best of it philosophically. "We got to grin 'n' bear some things in this world,

Hazel," he said to her soon after her return from school in Barre, "'n' carry a cross, ez the parson sez. Mebbe Martha 'n' them two boys o' hern is my cross now. All I kin hope fer is you will help me bear it till ye git married, if ye do, 'n' then — wal then I'm goin' to build me a shack down by the shore 'n' live thar 'n' drop the cross. Martha kin hev the house all to herself then."

So unfit for one another were they that within two years after the fatal step Uncle Asa began occupying a separate sleeping-room, and after that avoided Martha as much as possible. Hazel could neither do or say anything to mend matters, in fact, had no wish to do so. From the very outset, she despised, almost hated her stepmother, and in order not to be obligated in any way to her, as soon as she obtained a chance to teach, she insisted upon paying Martha for her board. This was the family status that June day when Stacy burst out of the woods upon her so suddenly, and one cause for her first apparent dislike of him arose from the fact that Martha speedily assured her that he must be an eligible catch for a husband and, "if she knew her business she'd set her cap for him forthwith."

To "set her cap" for anybody was not Hazel's way, and to be urged to do so by a stepmother she hated, was even worse. "I'm not running after

any man as I've known some shameless women to do," she sarcastically assured Martha, "and I don't need your advice. I just despise any woman who will do such a thing." Then, having discharged this Parthian arrow, she left her.

Another and more serious cause for distrust of Stacy came intuitively to her the first day when Uncle Asa took him fishing, and was due to her suspicion that he was another Curtis North, and there to inveigle some one in some swindling scheme. His unexpected return five days after his departure — for she heard of it the night he arrived — also made her more distrustful, and then, to cap the climax, came an assertion from this cousin of Molly Bascom, soon after Stacy saw these two in the hammock.

"Who is his job lots?" this Arthur Penrose questioned rather flippantly after Stacy had raised his hat and passed on.

"Oh, it's a Mr. Whipple from Albion," responded Hazel, indifferently. "He was here last week trout fishing, and father took him out. I don't know anything more about him, or care."

"I saw him hanging around the Barre House the past four days," Master Arthur rejoined, "and once also in close discussion with another stranger — two, in fact — down by the docks. One was a big,

pompous fellow with white side-whiskers. His name, I found out, was a queer one — Pentecost Curtis — and he'd been loafing around Barre a week."

Then, and straightway, Hazel did sit up and take notice! "Did he have a red face — a big fat man —" she queried anxiously, "and wear a heavy gold chain and big watch charm?"

"Yes, that's him," returned Arthur cheerfully. "A regular old man dude with stunning togs. That's what made me look him up. He was a whooper, and the chap with him, he was a little monkey, with snaky eyes — Mexican, I should say. I can't imagine what they were in Barre for. Putting up some scheme with this chap who bowed to you, I guess. They looked the part."

The fat was in the fire now and blazing merrily — at least in Hazel's mind, and she at once began to ply her Barre friend with all manner of questions anent these two and their possible errand in Barre, but without eliciting any more facts than had been vouchsafed her. With unusual feminine discretion, also, she kept her suspicions of who this Pentecost Curtis actually was to herself, and Mr. Arthur Penrose, while willing enough to carry gossip to Oakdale, and insinuate all manner of evil things against a man who even bowed to Hazel —

whom, by the way, he admired intensely — was deprived of any chance to carry news to Barre. Neither would she or did she ask any questions about Stacy now. Not from any sentimental interest in him, for none had come to her so far, yet she was lofty in her ideas of honor, and, therefore, Stacy, having once broken bread in her tent, so to speak, was, or must be considered, a friend until actually proven otherwise.

The lawn party, or, what it actually was, a dozen of Oakdale's young folk gathered to help entertain Miss Molly Bascom's cousin, soon lost its attraction for Hazel. She was too anxious to see her father and question him to enjoy anything here, so she excused herself, and made ready to depart.

"I'm coming over this evening, may I?" Arthur whispered at the gate, and a smile from Hazel at his way of asking and cool "Yes, if you won't stay late," were his reward, for the plain fact was, that Mr. Arthur Penrose, while from one of the best Barre families, bored Hazel excessively. She had met him during her one winter's experience of social life in Barre, had danced with him, been escorted to theaters, he had visited Oakdale twice before — once remaining two weeks, while a common friend, Miss Jennie Oaks, was sojourning with Hazel — and all to pay court to Hazel. It had availed him

but little, for while considered "a nice young man," he was shallow and foppish, smoked cigarettes, which Hazel abominated, and she therefore barely tolerated him. And now, in spite of her distrust of Stacy, even in spite of this new revelation of his probable duplicity, she was forced to contrast the two men, and Stacy lost nothing by it. Once away from the lawn party this peculiar contradiction found expression quite characteristic of her.

"Oh, why will nice manly men stoop to ways that are dark and tricks that are vain?" she said to herself homeward bound. "He certainly is a manly fellow, his eyes haunt me, he is swayed by music, and so has some fine sentiment, and he is so fearless! Oh, I wish I didn't have to distrust him!"

Who "he" was, it is needless to assert.

But she was full to the brim with suspicion now. That this white-whiskered man whom she recalled so vividly and his nefarious visit to Oakdale, had now been seen in consultation with Stacy, was proof positive of the latter's being another such swindler, and his visit to the village inevitably must be for a sinister purpose. And early that evening, or when first she could speak to her father alone, she pounced upon him like a young hawk.

"Father," she said in triumphant tone, "you know what my suspicions of that Mr. Whipple

were, or what I said of him — well, he went to Barre from here, met and had a consultation with that Curtis North (now calling himself Pentecost Curtis), who sold you that mine stock, and came back to see you again, I know, for Martha says he was here this morning. You took him to the train I am sure, and — and, father, there is some game afoot you won't tell me about. Did you know he went to Barre to meet that man I'm sure is a swindler?"

Then Uncle Asa's face took on one of his benign smiles and his eyes twinkled.

"Girlie," he said tenderly, yet chuckling, "you've found a whangdoodle's nest, sure's a gun, 'n' the old bird's on! I own up. I'm caught. I hain't 'zackly bought some mine stock, I've done wuss, I've swapped the hull farm, the house, 'n' B'ar Hole Swamp for the mine itself!"

Then he chuckled again.

"Come, girlie," he added a moment later, and enclosing her face in his two hands — a way with him —" can't ye trust yer old dad no more? Do ye honestly think I'd git bit by the same snake twice agoin'? That is 'lowin' I was bit by that mine stock, which ain't sartin yet? Do ye honestly think I need a keeper over me, girlie?"

"Oh, no, no, father, I don't," came from

Hazel speedily. "Only what does all this mean, and did you know that North man was in Barre to meet Mr. Whipple? Oh, tell me, please, father."

"I'll tell ye suthin 'most gals ez sweet ez you 'ud like better to know," he responded. "That is if you'll keep mum. Swar to goodness, ye will?"

"Yes, yes, father," again in anxious tone, "what is it?"

"Wal, girlie" (more tenderly and now enclosing her lithe waist with one arm), "thar's a nice young feller come here 'bout ten days ago, saw ye fust go off up under the big pine tree, seen ye a good deal sense 'n' he's — wal, he's fallen plumb, plunk in love with ye, all over, hook, line, bob, 'n' sinker! Thar now, what'd ye think o' that?"

Then Hazel grew rose red.

"Did he say so?" she queried, quivering.

"Say so!" ejaculated Uncle Asa with a snort. "Say, girlie, do ye s'pose that Whipple feller is a plumb gone jibberin' idjit 'n' rapscallion biled into one? He hain't said nothin' 'cept you was a gal whose smile he'd consider ez the key to Heaven, or suthin o' that sort. Oh, you've found out a lot, but thar's more comin'— mebbe — you can't even guess now, 'n' I won't tell ye." Then and much to Hazel's surprise, he stooped suddenly and kissed her.

And that night in the seclusion of her room and when ready for Slumberland, Hazel held communion with herself. Also, and at the same time, surveyed herself in her small gilt-framed mirror — too small to do justice to the reflected picture that now smiled out from it. And her rose-tinted face, tender eyes, and luxuriant black hair like a flowing mane half enclosing her daintily rounded shoulders, white-draped, made a picture that would have set Stacy's heart a-tingle could he but peeped in just then. A strangely sweet and quite new mysticism also added a thrill to her own pulses, half vexing, half enchanting, scarce explainable. And was this man, this bold fellow she had so doubted and distrusted, yet admired, the coming Prince Perfect ready to lay his heart at her dainty feet for her to say "yes" to, and let him dominate her life or else reject, as she now felt that she would if the chance came? And what was the meaning of her father's hilarious action? In all the years of their life since her mother's death she had never seen him in such a mood, so like a big boy ready to shout and turn handsprings from insane joy. And what could have happened so to upset him? What magic spell had this new admirer of her own sweet self woven over her calm, philosophic father? And

right in the face of a discovery of her own that she felt was prima facie evidence of this young man's guilt? It was past understanding!

And the more she conned the situation over, Stacy Whipple's visit here, his open admiration of herself — pleasing and quite natural, his going away, mysterious and sudden return, pursuit of her father, and now this gay turn of her benign parent all combined — the more mysterious it all seemed. And why should this young man first disclose his love for herself to her father? It wasn't the usual way, according to her own intuitions and the story books. No harm, of course, and quite honorable, yet unusual. But there was something beyond this, some other development more astounding than the simple one of an admission of love for herself, she was sure. She had never been one to question her father's moods to any extent. She had unlimited faith in his good sense and love for herself, and also knew that her stepmother had proved herself a thorn in his side, and that any inquiries as to the cause of his moods, had better be avoided. She believed as well that his own honesty and confidence in others had been taken advantage of by this swindler, North, and why might it not be another swindling game now being worked by

Stacy, with an assertion of love for herself as a clinching argument?

During the call of Mr. Penrose that evening, he had repeated his description of this Pentecost Curtis and Otero with rather vapid assertions about their mission to Barre, but this had no weight with Hazel now beyond the fact of identity. The one crucial mystery, the one past all understanding, was why her father, knowing her suspicions of Stacy, should yet ignore them now in the face of being assured that Curtis North, masked as Pentecost Curtis, had been seen in consultation with him.

It is needless to say that she found Slumberland far distant that night, and so worried was she over this problem, that she tossed and turned on her pillow for hours, unconscious of the murmur of the near-by brook or the sweet fragrance of the blooming lilacs that entered her open windows. While she might have enjoyed the first sweet illusion of love, or its coming to tinge her dreams, instead, it was the ogre of duplicity and danger to her father that haunted her.

Three days after, and duly delivered to her by the stage driver, Uncle Levi, came the package of books and music from Stacy.

"It's from Albion," Uncle Levi asserted, watch-

ing her curiously. "Wa'n't that whar that young feller, Whipple, cum from?"

"I am sure I don't know," declared Hazel innocently. "I never asked Mr. Whipple where he came from."

"I s'pose ye know, or ye've heard," he added, "somebody's goin' to buy B'ar Hole Swamp 'n' dam it, hain't ye? He told me so, anyhow."

"Oh, yes, I heard that three days ago," returned Hazel indifferently, "but I don't believe it." Then she hurried to her room to open the package as speedily as possible; also with trembling fingers and flushed face as well, for she knew on the instant who had sent it.

And one day later, on the arrival of the last train from Barre, there alighted from it a dapper little chap with shifty black eyes, mustache waxed to two sharp points, garbed in light-grey summer suit, tan shoes, gray spats, and carrying a cane and suit-case.

"It ees to Oakdale town I vish to go," he said to Uncle Levi. And long before he arrived there he became fully informed by that worthy talebearer of several pertinent facts and the intentions of some mysterious persons, as Stacy had intended that he should be.

The trap was now well baited and wide open.

CHAPTER XIV

SIX years of the inrush of gold seekers to a mining camp is like a generation of time towards its growth. In a night, almost, it springs up like Jonah's gourd or a mushroom; and from the cluster of the crudest sod hovels and board shacks Stacy first saw Rawhide to be — now as he looked upon it from the piazza of the "Hotel Rawhide" that morning of his arrival, he beheld a marvel of growth and change. From this vantage point at the upper end of its main street he saw handsome gray stone buildings with big plate glass windows, and architectural in design. A bank with pillars and bastions of gray marble occupied one street corner, a ten-story iron and concrete building faced it, the spires of three churches — one upbearing a big gilt cross, evidently Catholic — arose from the medley of structures, the white globes of arc lights were in ample evidence adown the vista, and trolley cars could be seen coming or going upon the main thoroughfare. Beyond and across the canyon, tiers of dwellings arose along the base of the mountain slope, an iron bridge crossed the brawling stream,

shop chimneys peeped up from its bank, and a busy, crowding throng of humanity, including well-dressed women, were everywhere visible.

For an hour Stacy surveyed this panorama of amazing growth while he smoked and cogitated upon the phenomenon, then Harkins came up to the hotel.

"I'll show you around now, Mr. Whipple," he assured Stacy, and nothing loth the latter joined him in a tour of inspection.

"I can't locate a single landmark," Stacy admitted after a half-hour of this, "not even the spot where the one-story saloon stood and where I saw this Curtis North and his pal, 'Skim,' as you called him, swapping cards."

"There's where it stood," replied Harkins, pointing to a six-story building with a dry-goods store occupying an entire lower floor, "and Tom McCue, the jolly Irishman who ran it, owns that block and is worth a round million and so fat he can't run or fight. All he does is collect his rents and tell stories of the 'ould days' in Rawhide. He is a character here, with a memory like a mirror and the deeds, doings, and history of the old camp crowd at his tongue's end. We will drop into Tim Riley's saloon, his loafing place, and I'll introduce you as a tourist visiting here.

"There's where the cabin stood where that miner was found dead," Harkins said five minutes later, on a side street and pointing to a pretentious concrete building labeled "Odeon Theater, Vaudeville." "And here is the watch charm your man North wore that fatal night," he added, now drawing it from his pocket. "I found it under the dead man that afternoon. It was this clue and the fact both North and Skim had hired horses at two o'clock that morning and rode to the station, leaving on the same train you came on, that satisfied me they were parties to the murder. The two women took the stage leaving here then at about seven in the morning, and the killing was not heard of until that afternoon, or when this other miner came to and crawled out of the cabin."

Stacy took the massive gold buffalo-head fob now destined to play so important a part in his plans, and eyed it curiously. It was crudely made, evidently filed or carved from a lump of virgin gold, and as conspicuous and vulgar a part of man's adornment as Curtis North himself was of the race of men. Doubtless, also, as now recurred to Stacy in an instant, there must be scores of men in Rawhide who would swear to having seen it worn by Curtis North, if that was necessary, thus adding one more valuable fact or bit of evidence.

"Don't lose it, Mr. Harkins," he cautioned him, now handing it back. "It may be worth ten times its weight to me later on."

"I've kept it safe for almost six years," Harkins returned smiling, "so guess I can keep it a few months more.

"Here's where McCue loafs," he added, now leading the way through a luxuriously furnished bar-room into its back room, and here were two men tilted back in their chairs and smoking black clay pipes. One, Stacy recognized on the instant as the redoubtable McCue; rotund and red-faced.

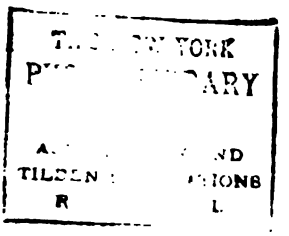
A "Hullo, Jim," from him to Harkins, as he arose and the two shook hands, and a "My friend, Mr. Whipple, Mr. McCue and Mr. Casey," comprised the off-hand greetings, and then the incomers sat down.

"Mr. Whipple is a friend of mine paying Rawhide a flying visit, Tom," Harkins next explained, "and I brought him here to call on you."

"Ony frind o' yours is me frind, too," McCue responded, now rapping on a small round table. "Sarve the jintl'min," he added with a grandiloquent handwave to the barkeeper who came at his summons, "an' the bist ye hov."

"An' so ye do be visitin' the town, is it?" he

ONE, STACY RECOGNIZED ON THE INSTANT.—*Page 166.*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next queried, after the libation and relighting his pipe. "Well, it's a foine city, so it be, but dom dull now. Not loike the ould times at all, at all."

"I was here about six years ago for a few days," Stacy asserted in response, "and visited your place a few times."

"An' did ye?" smiled McCue, much pleased. "Shure that was foine. Och, be jabers, but we had g-r-reat fun those days, shure we did," he continued. "Not a week but someone was shot or sthrung up by the b'ys for devilmint. Ah, but those toimes war g-r-reat for sport. Shure I had two kilt in me place one month, so I did, but it's all over now. Nothin' doin' at all, sor, but ate an' slape an' pull at me pipe all the day long."

Then he sighed and puffed hard at his pipe to get it well going again.

"Do ye raycollect the little Chink, Jim, we sthrung up one mornin'?" he again continued after the pause, "the little monkey, so he war, who put a ball into Andy O'Houlihan jist bekase he took his washin' widout payin'? An' how we forgot to tie his hands an' the cuss got holt o' the rope an' climbed up an' the b'ys shot him? Ah, but thar war lively toimes thin, an' money so plinty, too. Many a night I tuk in two hundred dollars in me place jist for

dhrinks, an' as much more in the two kitties. But the ould toimes is gone for good, an' dom dull now, dom dull."

"Do you remember a fellow by name of North, Curtis North?" Stacy now inquired, smiling at the Irishman who so enjoyed shootings and lynchings. "A chap with big white side-whiskers?"

"An' shure I do," smiled McCue, cheering up again, "an' a broth ov a b'y he war, too, to spind money, jist loike it war brown laves an' he owned the world. But he wint sour over a couple o' wimmen, so he did, an' lift bechune two days. Kilt a man for 'em, didn't he, Jim? A Swede be the name o' Johnson, an' 'most kilt another, Olaf Tygson, wa'n't it, Jim?"

"I think that was the name," responded Harkins, also smiling. "Some sort of a -son. They both were like all Swedes. Do you know what has become of him?"

"Oh, he's livin', so he is," answered McCue. "I saw him in town a month ago. He's up to Humpback now, so he be."

"Do you have any idea where the women are?" Stacy next queried, cautiously. "That is, if anyone wanted to find them?"

"Shure I don't," came from McCue, now eyeing Stacy sharply, "an'— an'— axin' yer pardon, sor,

but take me advice an' don't be chasin' 'em, sor, widout ye want to lose money an' lots of it, sor. Them sort of wimmen do be the divil's own, so they be. Lave 'em alone, Mister Whipple, lave 'em alone."

Much more of this loquacious Irishman's dialogue was listened to by Stacy with interest; then, after treating in turn, he and Harkins made another tour of the town and returned to the hotel.

"It looks as if you had all the evidence you need," Harkins now asserted. "This Swede, Tygson, can be found if you care to go to the expense, and we can take him east to confront your man, North, if you wish. My idea, however, is it won't be necessary to do that. It all depends upon what you want to do, Mr. Whipple. Is it law and justice you want meted out to him, or just force him to give up the deed you explained about? Take your choice; you can have either one, but not both."

"I know that," admitted Stacy, stroking his mustache. "But — but — I want to think it over before deciding. There are wheels within wheels in this affair, and mixed up in the game is a handsome adventuress I once admired, now intimate with your Greaser, 'Skim,' or Otero; also with Curtis North and a member of the Barre town committee, who are obligated to pay us a lot of money in the near

future. Oh, it's a merry mix-up, I assure you. The one thing I am positive about is that I don't want to make a personal enemy now, or any more so than she is, of this handsome adventuress I told you about. She has no hold on me, yet you know a woman like that can make things mighty unpleasant for any man if she sets about it."

"Right you are," laughed Harkins, who had traveled, and observed many things. "The joker in this pack is the woman — Carmen, I think you said her name was — or rather her beauty and its pull on men is the joker. No, Brother Whipple," he added after a long pause, "don't play any game for high stakes with a joker in the pack. It isn't safe. And even less so when the said joker is a handsome woman without a scrap of honor."

And just then Stacy thought of the diamond bracelet this harpy had obtained with mate to it promised, for her aid to "do" him, and grinned ruefully. Also kicked himself, metaphorically, to think how he once had been made so many kinds of a fool of by his admiration of "La Rosa."

Hazel's face came to mind at this juncture as well, and the fine scorn that would spread over it were she but informed how he had once pursued the Carmen. Innocently, too, as a matter of fact, and yet Hazel would never believe it of him — no

woman will — as he knew full well; and then another rueful grin came to his lips, for none of us enjoys the predicament of being wrongfully believed guilty, yet unable to prove it.

"I think, Brother Harkins," he said finally, "we will go a *leetle* slow in this matter, as Uncle Asa would say. I'd like to see justice meted out to this swindler and murderer combined. I almost feel that I'd enjoy what your friend McCue admits he so often did — a lynching bee with Curtis North as its star feature. If he could be lured to this town and a picked committee of 'the b'ys' given a tip to do their duty it would, as Col. Sellers said, 'meet with my entire approbation.' But I don't see how it can be done. If my trap scores, and you and I can make North give up the deed I suppose he has now obtained, I'll spend a thousand dollars to aid you in luring 'his whiskers' to Rawhide and — you can attend to the rest. But from my viewpoint now I don't want to be mixed up in it.

"I've got to go on to Seattle," he added after a moment's pause, "and must use a month to finish my business in the West. In the meantime I wish you'd hunt up this Olaf Tygson, obtain any sort of affidavit you think best from him, also any other corroborative evidence you can find, and when I return to Rawhide, as I shall before going East, we

will decide how to act. It may be best for you to go on with me and land this villain before he skips the country."

Then, being a considerate business man, he wrote a check for two hundred dollars and handed it to Harkins, "for contingent expenses," as he assured him.

"Your town, Mr. Harkins, with its marvelous growth appeals to me especially," Stacy continued, changing the subject, after this adjustment of their mutual plans, "for I am by nature an air-castle builder myself, and here is a pertinent example of what we in the East would call an impossibility. Also proof positive that law, order, and prosperity go hand in hand. Six years ago Rawhide, as you assert, was practically a canker spot on the map with a few hundred greedy gold-seekers for its main population and workers, with perhaps one quarter as many thieves, swindlers, and harpies who came to prey upon them. That condition, or what your friend McCue called 'great doin's wid lynchin's an' shootin's ivery wake or two,' lasted but a short while, then, presto! law steps in, away go the evil spirits, the law-breakers, and a well-ordered and well-behaved town springs up in place of the pest house of vice it once was. You, also, with your

Vigilance Committee backing, are entitled to much of the credit as well."

"Yes, a little, maybe," responded Harkins modestly, "and the same law and order will in due time clean out and purify all mining camps, I've noticed. All it needs is to have the organization of public sentiment, string up a few, and the rest fall over themselves to get away, as they did from here."

"How would it work if this Curtis North was to set foot in Rawhide now?" interrupted Stacy, castle building again. "Would you and your backers decide a lynching bee about the right welcome for him?"

"Oh, I could fix it, maybe," smiled Harkins, "but it wouldn't be necessary. We have a law court now."

"Yes, and lawyers to quibble and fight prosecution and defeat justice just as long as a criminal's money lasts," responded Stacy, who had had experience with the clan.

"That is true," admitted Harkins, smiling again, "but I suppose lawyers are a mixed evil from a percentage basis. That is, allowing that one in five is strictly honest and would not knowingly defend an actual criminal no matter how fat the fee."

"Put it one in ten and I'll accept the amend-

ment," interjected Stacy, who was more of a cynic.

"And now and then an innocent man needs defense," continued Harkins, "so we do need lawyers after all."

"Yes, perhaps in a few cases," asserted Stacy, "but what we need more is a higher standard of professional honor among them — those who would refuse to defend anyone they had reason to believe was guilty. As it is, not one in ten but that will lock his conscience in the safe and fight justice tooth and nail so long as a criminal's money lasts."

When Stacy left Rawhide the next day he carried away two distinct impressions: First, of its marvelous growth and purification from a rude mining camp where vice and crime of every grade ruled supreme, to a prosperous, well-behaved, and properly-governed town with churches, a library, and law and order; the other, its picturesque location at the apex of a triangular valley surrounded by sharply-defined mountains, between two of which opened a winding gorge, and adown which leaped and cascaded a sizable stream called The Humpback. Timber — fir, spruce, and larch of primal growth — covered all foothills; the stream was limitless for the production of power; gold-bearing quartz was the basic feature of the mountain, and so herein and hereabout lay all the rudiments needed

for a prosperous mining town such as had already started. And now as all this crystallized in his mind and became a fixed picture, back to Oakdale he leaped in thought and to the city soon to spring up at the bidding of another stream — the Rocky Glen brook, with a snug harbor and the white wings of commerce to add impetus. Here was no lawless camp to overcome and purify. Instead, here lay a fertile valley, already tilled, and a community of simple-minded, God-respecting farmers of pure blood and honest minds, to start his city aright. And here, also, dwelt a keen-witted, sweet-faced little maid, whose mind was beyond her years and who had sprung out of the shadow of obscurity like a bewitching fairy to touch his heart with the magic wand of love, and perhaps become the queen of his future life.

And now, once more on board a main line Pullman train and speeding further westward, somehow he began to feel himself in the lilac and syringa-shaded porch in Hazel Dell once more, to smell the mingled fragrance of that sequestered spot, and to hear the murmuring brook and Hazel's auto-harp again.

"In love?" you ask once more.

Yes, very much so now. In fact so much so that no peace and no rest for his air-castle-building spirit

was possible unless this occult little fairy queen shared it.

In the meantime, Curtis North, alias Pentecost Curtis, and Otero must be reckoned with.

CHAPTER XV

AS Sam Walter Foss has so impressively said, "There are pioneer souls that blaze their path where never highway ran." And Stacy Whipple's was such a one. There are, also, other pioneer souls not as sensible and idyllic as his who blaze their way, not as he did in the skies, but underground. And Curtis North was possessed of one. From the very outset of his life as a well-educated son of a Puritan father, he had found living by his wits and imposing upon the credulity of others an easy matter. Beginning as a peddler of quack nostrums, he had taken to being advance agent for a circus, then to running a side show as part of that, together with the usual gambling devices used to fleece the unsophisticated. Next, he became manager of a branch bucket shop in a small city, with a poker club as an adjunct, and finally, with ample means gathered in these various industries, he had drifted westward to Rawhide, met and attached to himself one Leon Otero, as unscrupulous and keen-witted a gambler as he, and organized The Rawhide Gold Mining and Reduction Company

in legal manner and of alluring prospectus, and thus armed and equipped had returned East to a more civilized country to sell stock and devour the unwary.

But, like many another bumptious and successful gambler, he sighed for new people to conquer, greater schemes to manipulate, and a wider scope for swindling. To this end and purpose he came to New York, and to that Mecca of all greatest gamblers, Wall Street. Here, with an office in the name of "Curtis & Company" in a building devoted to such, he had just established himself when along came a "tip," as he would call it, that led him to Barre. He did not go to Oakdale, for obvious reasons, however. He had been there once as Curtis North and carried away a mere trifle of about five thousand dollars as reward for a month's pleasure sojourn. Anyhow, that was not necessary. He now had a side-partner of as keen wits, if less money, who could do as well — even better — since to facilitate such swindling he was now posing as the ostensible agent for a steamship company whose business was the importation of emigrants from various European countries.

And be it said, criminals of all classes and both sexes were just as welcome to them as honest people, so long as the price was forthcoming.

Not for long did Curtis North — now and for five years masked as Pentecost Curtis, the given name of which had been his father's — remain in Barre. It was neither prudent nor necessary, and so having hatched the plot that was adroitly and also legally to make the firm of Bemis, Colby & Company pay well for a reservoir site they needed, he left the details to be worked out by his tool, Otero, and hied himself away to New York.

Here, in line with his new vocation and ambition, he began to lay plans for another swindling scheme, which was the broad and comprehensive one of organizing a stock company to buy up and reclaim a few thousand acres of worthless marsh land on the Passaic river above Newark. To this end he first set about obtaining a charter under the complaisant laws of New Jersey. He secured next a suitable chart or map of the lands in question, with a prospectus in connection therewith, setting forth in glowing terms the ostensible object of the company and plans and dividends sure to be paid. This, also, he knew, was the trump card sure to take the trick of the gullible public's money. It had worked successfully in the Rawhide swindle, and while not all of that capital stock had been sold before its master spirit grew wary, changed his name, and abandoned it, enough had been converted into cash

to give him means to carry out a fourfold greater one.

But the carrying out of this new, larger, and more plausible scheme must take more time. Surveys and maps must be made and men hired to make them. A few business men of minor prominence and some reputation for honesty must be cajoled and persuaded to allow the use of their names — given stock, of course, as payment. Printers' ink and lithographers' aid were to be called in, and many lesser details attended to. The plan and proposition must also wear the guise of legality, and once hatched and under way, some land must actually be bought, more secured for possible need by the attainment of options, and everything apparently done from honest intent and purpose. The firm of Curtis & Company, Mills Building, Wall Street, were, of course, reputable business men! Pentecost Curtis, a well-to-do financier whose experience and money was back of and in this philanthropic scheme to furnish low-cost building lots and home sites for the working class of an overcrowded city! Why, to be sure, they were, as everything in the prospectus must assert; and beyond that, no loophole must be left whereby if the plan failed any disgruntled investor could take legal action against the immaculate and honor-

able firm of Curtis & Company! Not for one moment! That would be preposterous!

And so Pentecost Curtis, fat, sleek, suave, smooth-spoken, always well-garbed, and living luxuriously at a prominent hotel, stroked his flowing side-whiskers, smoked choice cigars, took an occasional flyer in the stock market to keep in touch with men whose names he might need later, and assured every one he became at all intimate with that stock speculation was after all too risky for him to follow, and that the more stable one of investment in and improvement of suburban property promised safer and more certain returns.

And it did — to him.

He did not fear ever meeting one of those he had swindled as Curtis North, or any outcome from the debauch that had cost a poor miner his life. That, after all, was only an episode common enough in the lawless camp where it happened, where a gambler shot over a card table, or a red-handed desperado strung up on the nearest tree was an incident forgotten in a week. If ever accused of connection with this orgie of drink and robbery he could brazenly deny his identity, he was sure, and force its belief. Only two factors or connecting links ever troubled him. The first, his whiskers so noticeable, also so consoling to his vanity; he had even thought best

at the time he changed his name to shave them off, but so satisfying were they to his own self-approval that he could not do so. The other and less dangerous link was the lost watch fob he had not missed that fatal night until too late to return and look for it. That it had been taken possession of by one of the women he was positive — they were the sort who kept all they got, no matter how obtained — and he was almost certain that this valuable lump of gold had long ago vanished in some melting crucible. So far as his connection with The Rawhide Gold Mining Company was concerned, and the many he had induced to buy stock, it never troubled him one iota. There were so many others like it, organized wherever gold was mined or oil found, that were as specious, that one more, or his own, only proved him to be in the wide-spread game of swindling gullible investors who deserved no pity since they only bought from the belief that they were to receive fabulous returns. He was not afraid to go to Oakdale, either, or to meet Uncle Asa. He would have assured that confiding "Rube," as he thought him to be, that Rawhide stock was all right, the mine being developed slowly but surely, and that it sooner or later would pay big dividends. He would, so conscienceless was he, and possessed of so much brazen impudence,

have set out to sell even Uncle Asa more stock, also others, only for one fact; that for certain unfortunate reasons he had decided to leave Rawhide in haste and change his name. There was, also, one other flaw besides whiskers in his defensive armor and that the hastily adopted first name, Curtis, as the last one of his alias. While keen and quick enough when it came to swindling others, in this case his occultism slipped a cog, so to speak, and left a dangenerous similarity of name to anyone who had both seen him and heard his original one often enough to fix it in mind. He fancied himself secure, however, had ample means to live well, also carry out any new scheme requiring some investment, and as the prosperous capitalist he now practically proclaimed himself to be, was armed and equipped to resent any insinuation to the contrary.

"Money will buy all things — lawyers, juries, judges, the whole shooting match," he would say to himself reassuringly when a little lurking fear of retribution crept into his feelings, as it now and then did. "Business is only a game of robbery, high or low, and all around, from peanut stands to the Standard Oil Trust. I've got the price of self-defense any time, there is no proof of anything against me — not even that I was in the cabin the night that stupid Swede fell downstairs and

cracked his own skull — so the public, the whole push, can go chase themselves for all I care."

He little thought Nemesis in the guise of his own unscrupulous scheming was even now pursuing him, with Stacy Whipple adding inspiration.

CHAPTER XVI

THE one ruling ambition of Landlord Sam Gates's life outside of providing for his limited number of guests was to play practical jokes, and his keen Yankee shrewdness, knowledge of human nature, and plausible speech served him well at this rather invidious game. Of course he had exhausted his possibilities of deceiving any of Oakdale's residents long before Stacy was so adroitly steered into Bear Hole Swamp, so newcomers were all that Sam could vent his peculiar talent upon. And so it came to pass that when Uncle Levi drove up to Sam's hostelry one afternoon just after supper time, and a dapper little dude with much-waxed mustache, with cane and small suit-case, alighted, Sam eyed him with much the same feelings that a hawk would eye a brood of young chickens. Business, however, came first with Sam, so he at once proceeded to take care of so well-dressed an arrival in his most urbane manner, assigned and showed him to the best front room, asked what he'd like cooked for supper, invited him to take a nip while waiting for it, and as soon as Mr.

Leon Otero had been relegated to the care of the high priestess of the dining-room, Sam returned to the piazza and the Old Guard there gathered to consider matters generally.

"Who is he?" queried Bascom, usually the spokesman of their retinue. "A drummer?"

"No-o," drawled Sam, "too slick-lookin', 'n' too fussy. Wanted the shutters shut fust thing in his room, 'n' a key for the door. Said he didn't like to leave his things 'thout bein' locked up. He ain't no drummer. They don't wax their mustaches 'n' look like they come out o' a bandbox."

"Fisherman?" hazarded Lazy Luke, who invariably guessed wrong. "You'll start him into B'ar Hole if he is, I s'pose?"

"Mebbe," returned Sam with a half-smothered chuckle at the thought of so alluring a prospect. "That is if he's goin' to stay long 'nuff, 'n' kin be persuaded."

And so it came to pass when the new arrival returned to the piazza, sat down and lighted a cigarette, there were five there, each ready to coöperate to make his visit to Oakdale as pleasant as possible — for themselves.

"Is this your first visit here, Mr. Otero?" inquired Sam politely by way of a beginning.

"It ees," answered Otero, looking around the

scattered village, " and a so much smaller town than I haf heard."

" Sellin' goods, I s'pose," was the next remark of the adroit Sam.

" No, I haf come on ze business of my company, not to sell something," returned Otero evasively.

" Buyin' land mebbe," persisted Sam unabashed. " I heerd some company was plannin' to put up a big dam here, 'n' build a shop."

Then Mr. Leon Otero turned his snaky eyes on Sam and smiled wisely. " I am not to tell what my company haf planned," he answered suavely, " I am to look around."

" O' course; sartin', sartin'," replied Sam soothingly, " only I heerd your company was goin' to buy B'ar Hole Swamp, 'n' figgered you was here to do it."

" Ees this swamp you call ze bear's hole ze right spot for a dam? " inquired Otero with a satisfied smile.

" None better," asserted Sam, unconsciously playing Stacy's game. " In fact Natur just riz hills all 'round it ez ef on purpose fer a dam. That's what the other feller who looked it over said, anyhow. I s'pose he war from your company, too, eh? His name was Whipple. You know about him, I s'pose? "

"I know him, yes," admitted Otero, smiling again, "and I shall look ze swamp over myself. Who is it owns ze land?"

"Oh, it's Uncle Asa's, Asa Webster's, 'n' he lives jist below it on the brook," vouchsafed Sam speedily, "'n' I cal'late he'd sell it cheap. 'Tain't wuth much fer anything but a pond. You want to look it over, foller the brook down through," he added eagerly, "'n' mebbe ketch a mess o' trout to-morrer, eh? I kin rig ye up 'n' take ye to the head on't in the mornin' if ye like."

And having thus paved the way for his own pet practical joke and almost pushed Otero into the trap set for him by Stacy, Sam smiled with serene satisfaction. To add more bait for his own trap also, he now began to extol the merits of Bear Hole Brook as a trout stream, and to tell what big ones were often caught in it, and how Mr. Otero would probably enjoy a day of rare sport on the morrow.

"I haf not fished for ze trout for many years," the victim declared next morning, when duly fitted out with a pair of Sam's boots too big for him, and a pair of Sam's trousers large enough to turn around in, he was conveyed by that worthy to where Bear Hole Brook crossed the highway above the swamp. He still wore his own silk outing shirt, jaunty tie, high collar and straw hat, however, and

with creel and rod of Sam's lending, it is needless to say he presented a ludicrous appearance.

"You've got the greatest day's sport you ever had ahead o' ye," Sam now asserted, turning his horse around, "'n' 'bout four miles on't. You'll find a *leetle* brush o' course, but don't mind that. Thar's whar ye'll find the biggest trout, too. I cal'late you'll fill yer basket by noon 'n' then you want ter keep right on. Foller the brook 'n' it'll fetch ye right out by Uncle Asa's, 'n' then ye kin dicker with him 'bout buyin' the swamp fer a pond, if that's yer errand here. I s'pose the other feller's kinder paved the way fer the deal, mebbe? Uncle Asa's got a darter, too, perty gal, she is, ez anywhere about, 'n' ef ye make good time 'long the brook she'll cook ye a mess o' trout fer dinner if ye're kinder slick at coaxin'. She's sweeter'n peaches 'n' cream, too, she is, 'n' ain't got no beau." And having thus baited and opened his own trap most effectually, Sam drove away leaving Otero to his fate.

Once well away and out of sight around a bend in the road, however, Sam exploded in a burst of laughter.

"Got him hooked good 'n' fast, I cal'late," he exclaimed, shaking with its continuation, "'n' when he gits down whar them Mohawk briars is thickest

'n' black flies busy — wal, if he's got any cuss words, thar'll be suthin said."

Then, and still chuckling with suppressed laughter, he drove on.

It was seven A. M. of that hot July first morning, when Mr. Leon Otero, half of him looking the immaculate dude with legs in two bags, jointed his rod, baited his hook, lit a cigarette, and plunged into this almost impassable swamp. It was five P. M. when that same occult schemer and wily villain emerged from this morass, both boots left buried in some slough hole, his bag-like pants torn and black with mud, his silk shirt in shreds, collar, tie, and hat missing, and creel and rod left somewhere in the swamp. One eye was closed from the sting of a hornet, his face, neck, and hands black from swamp mire or streaked with bloody scratches, also swollen from thousands of vicious black-fly bites, and he was barely able to crawl. He had lost all points of the compass after following the winding stream a half-mile and not daring to leave it, conscious of being turned around, had kept on, sure that the only way of escaping the swamp alive was to stick to the stream.

"I vas 'most dead, my God, sir!" he exclaimed, finally emerging from the pine thicket and finding Uncle Asa raking hay on a hillside meadow. "Oh,

"Ze awful time as never vas."—*Page 191.*

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I haf had ze one hell time to git out ze swamp, sir," he moaned, now sinking to earth, exhausted, "ze awful time as never vas."

"Wal, ye look the part," ejaculated Uncle Asa, eyeing him keenly and instantly conscious that this dapper, woe-begone specimen of humanity was the man he had been anxiously awaiting now for five days. "Been through B'ar Hole Swamp, I cal'late," he added. "Who might ye be?"

"My name is Otero," Sam's victim responded weakly, "and you vas ze man ze landlord call Uncle Asa, vas you?"

"Yaas, that's me," drawled Uncle Asa, now on guard and beginning to rake hay again as if the arrival of this fellow was of no interest. He kept on raking, too, a few rods, and then Otero called to him again.

"I am so tired I cannot walk back to ze hotel," he said meekly, "and I vill pay you if you vill take me back. Vill you?"

Then Uncle Asa halted his raking and looked back at Otero hesitatingly. He knew his errand here, knew also that Sam had sent him into Bear Hole Swamp — his inevitable joke on all strangers — but now, nervous as he was over what this fellow's errand meant to him, the joke lost its point.

"I dunno but I might," he admitted finally, now

returning to where Otero sat. "It's hayin' time, 'n' I'm perty busy, though."

"I vill pay you, sir," Otero responded still more meekly, "pay you vell, only I can't valk no longer now."

Then Uncle Asa, Good Samaritan still, in spite of his abhorrence of this trickster, as he knew him to be, invited him down to the house and gave him opportunity to wash his mud-blackened face and hands, harnessed his horse, and conveyed him back to the village.

"How much I do owe you?" Otero queried when they drew up at the hotel.

"Not a cent," Uncle Asa responded. "I jest fetched ye back out o' pity fer a feller ez badly busted ez you war."

"I am to come and see you to-morrow," Otero responded, after thanking Uncle Asa. "It ees to talk business."

"What business?" demanded Uncle Asa. "I am too busy hayin' to talk much with anybody."

"Why, I vish to buy some land of you," returned Otero meekly still. "Perhaps I buy ze tam swamp that so near killed me to-day."

"Wal, ye needn't come on that 'count," returned Uncle Asa brusquely. "'Taint fer sale or rather thar's 'nother feller ez hez got a call on't." Then

having thus taken trick number one in the game of diamond-cut-diamond, he halted his nag with an out-turned wheel and awaited his passenger's alighting.

"But I vill come to see you," reiterated Otero after stepping out. And then, without a word of response, Uncle Asa drove away fully conscious he had his enemy at bay, at least.

"I'll give Sam a slap on the back fer playin' B'ar Hole on that little cuss," he ejaculated when well away from the hotel. "It sarved him right, the hyena."

"Wal, whar's my basket 'n' boots 'n' fish pole?" demanded Sam with well-simulated severity a moment later as Otero limped up the piazza. "Ye look's though ye'd bin run through a threshin' machine 'n' chucked in a mud hole arter that. Did — did ye ketch any trout?"

Then Leon Otero, the foppish little Mexican, conscious of his own ridiculous appearance, and seeing from the broad grins now spreading over Sam's and the Old Guard's faces that he had been made the target of a practical joke, grew pale with suppressed anger, while his snaky eyes glittered.

"Sacre, what you t'ink, I one tam fool to be sport for you? I — I could kill you!" he snarled. Then vanished inside and up to his room.

He appeared a half hour later (most of which had been spent by Sam in suppressing his laughter), looking more presentable, also in better temper. And then Sam, having enjoyed his joke thoroughly, set about mollifying his guest.

"I was afeared you mightn't bring back much of a string," he said soothingly and suppressing his inward laughter, "so I sent one o' the boys out to ketch some, 'n' I've got a nice mess cooked fer ye. A joke's a joke, so come into the barroom 'n' hev a drink on me, 'n' call it square. I won't charge ye nothin' fer the boots 'n' fishin' tackle ye left in the swamp. How'd ye come to lose 'em?" Then, and unable to restrain his merriment longer, he burst into laughter again.

"B'ar Hole is a perty tuff spot," he added a moment later, setting an array of bottles out upon the bar counter, "'n' we allus interduce it ez one o' the pints o' int'rest here to newcomers. I did to your partner — I s'pose — the other feller who come to look things over, 'n' he come out head up; worrit some but smilin'." Then, having thus established peace and ushered his guest into the dining-room, he returned to the piazza.

"That little cuss takes a joke 'bout ez a boy does pepper tea," he now asserted to the Old Guard awaiting him, and laughing again. "I'm out a pair

o' boots 'n' fishin' tackle, but 'twas wuth it, by gosh," and he shook with another spasm of laughter. "I'd a gin a fiver on top o' the boots to 'a' seen him 'bout the time he got out," he added, "'n' to 'a' heard him cuss. I cal'late them little Spanish fellers kin cuss some when they git started, too."

Mr. Leon Otero did not favor Sam and the Old Guard with much of his company that evening, however, for though mollified by the drink, and excellent supper of fried trout and strawberries, his pride had received a painful wound and he nursed it in his room with continuous cigarettes. He was, however, sure that this hill-bordered swamp he had floundered through was the dam site Bemis, Colby & Company wanted, that a minimum offer for it had been made to the farmer who owned it, and that he was in ample time to obtain possession, and make them pay smartly later on.

The one fortuitous feature of this game was that the stage driver, accepting Stacy's hints as facts, had talked of nothing else except the plan to buy Bear Hole Swamp by someone; Sam, anxious to play his joke, had forgotten to mention Rocky Glen brook, so Otero had no knowledge of its existence.

The next morning, well-garbed and serene once more, he started for Uncle Asa's.

CHAPTER XVII

WHILE Uncle Asa had feared himself unable to cope with this emissary of that arch-swindler, Curtis North, his first meeting with him, so mud-splashed and woe-begone from an all-day contest with Bear Hole Swamp, had assured him he was only an ordinary mortal, an unscrupulous thief no doubt, yet not one to be feared in the open, or in a contest of bargain-making. Uncle Asa's over-night preparation also stood him in hand, so he resolved and felt that he could be, as he would put it, "independent as a pig on ice."

He trusted Stacy, too, especially after what had passed between them, trusted his good sense and judgment also, and felt that his measure of this Curtis North and what his tool, Otero, would say and do, also pay for Bear Hole Swamp, was an accurate one. And so it came to pass that July morning when he, swinging his scythe in a meadow below the house and alongside the lane, saw Otero turn into it, leap the fence and advance to him,

Uncle Asa was well prepared for the bargain-driving contest now at hand.

He halted his scythe-swinging as Otero neared him, looked up, nodded, said "Good mornin'" in chilly tone, and awaited developments.

"I haf come to see you as I said I vould, Mr. Vebster," Otero asserted after his return "Good morning" and obsequious bow, "and to make vith you a price on zat swamp you call ze bear's hole if you vill sell it."

"Want to live thar, do ye?" returned Uncle Asa, grinning, as he thrust the end of the snath into the soil and leaned upon his scythe. "I should a thought ye'd got 'nuff o' that tangle-hole yisterday; ye looked like it anyhow."

"Oh, I did, it ees a tam hole," asserted Otero with a shrug. "An' ze flies, ze brambles, an' ze mud eat me up."

"'N' ye want to buy it, eh?" grunted Uncle Asa half scornfully. "Yew can't be right in your attic, yew want a keeper put over ye, yew do!"

"But I vill buy it if you make ze price low, it ees of no value I vas sure, a tam mud hole."

"Wuss'n that," grinned Uncle Asa. "Thar's snakes in it, too, red adders 'n' rattlers, hundreds on 'em. I can't see how ye missed gittin' bit, must

be they didn't like the looks o' ye; snakes air kinder p'ticular, though, sometimes."

"An' you t'ink zey no bite me for zat reason?" responded Otero, trying to smile while his eyes snapped.

"I didn't say so," drawled Uncle Asa, "only snakes is perty cunnin' critters, 'n' I never knowed o' their bitin' one 'nother."

For a long moment the glint in Otero's eyes denoted anger at this sarcasm, then he conquered it. "Vill you set a price on ze swamp an' woods below?" he asked almost haughtily. "I haf come here to buy it."

"Wal, then ye kin hike right away on the next train," returned Uncle Asa sharply, "fer 'tain't fer sale, not a foot on't, not even a snake."

"But you vill sell it at some price, von't you?" queried Otero, anxiously.

"Wal, yaas, I'll take a million dollars fer't," drawled Uncle Asa, grasping his scythe again. "Fetch me that in real money, 'n' I'll talk with ye. I hain't time now."

Then Otero experienced a sense of being thrown against a brick wall, for he had not planned on any such reception. He was also smarting from Uncle Asa's sarcastic shots about snakes, and, all in all, was decidedly nonplussed and rapidly getting angry.

And when a bargain-driving man so loses himself, he is gone.

"I haf come to buy zat swamp at a fair price," this one now reiterated crustily, "an' I vill gif you five t'ousand dollars for it all, an' ze wood land below, all of it."

"'N' I'll take forty thousand, 'n' throw in the snakes," returned Uncle Asa as sharply, "so put that in yer pipe 'n' smoke it. I hain't time to swap guff with ye. I've got mowin' ter do," and Uncle Asa began to swing his scythe again.

Then Otero, exasperated by this farmer's sarcasms and discomfited by his blunt refusals to consider what he thought an exorbitant price for the swamp, began to take counsel with himself, sure also that a much higher bid than his had been made by the other parties, or else the swamp actually bought by them. But he had come with positive orders from his backer to buy, had brought ten thousand dollars in large bills with him, and the "Old Rube," as he thought Uncle Asa to be, who held the key to this game of extortion, was now two rods away, and swinging his scythe as if his customer were of no more account than a snake in this horrible swamp. And the more Otero, the vain fop and sharper combined, dwelt on Uncle Asa's insolent references to snakes, the more angry

he grew. But he was wise enough to conceal it now.

"I vill make you one more offer," he said, now following after Uncle Asa, "I gif you six t'ousand for ze swamp."

"Nary six fer me, nothin' doin'," returned Uncle Asa exasperatingly, as he kept on mowing.

"I vill make it seven then?"

"Nix," with a shake of the head.

"I vill say eight then. Vill you take that?"

"No, I won't," snapped Uncle Asa, now halting and facing around, sure he had the game won.

"Vill you name a price you vill take?" came from Otero, almost desperate now. "Some price in reason?"

Then Uncle Asa glanced up and down the five-foot or a trifle more of snake-eyed, wax-mustached fop before him contemptuously. "Ef you'll promise never to set foot in this 'ere town agin," he drawled slowly, "I'll set a price fer the swamp 'n' wood lot below it, cash down, real money, no checks, 'n' ef ye don't take it right off the spot, I'll run ye off my land 'fore ye kin say boo! I won't dicker with ye a minute!"

"Vell, vat is it?" came from Otero, while his eyes glittered at the insult.

"It's nine thousand five hundred, and not a dern

cent less," came from Uncle Asa, "'n' say yes now or git!"

"I vill gif it when you hand me ze deed recorded," snarled Otero.

"I'll meet ye at Squire Phinney's in jist two hours all ready," admitted Uncle Asa, then turned and swung his scythe again as if this bargain was no more to him than the sale of a load of hay.

And Otero, the dapper little dude and snake in the grass, turned and left him, feeling himself to be about what he was, though angry all over.

Through all his various and very crooked career so far, he had never been so humiliated or insulted as now, and the very recent trick of Sam's was a part of the combined outrage.

When once well out of sight, Uncle Asa, who had covertly watched Otero depart, now threw his scythe aside, and made a bee-line for the house.

Someone else, no less a person than Hazel, had also been watching this interview from an ambush, and met him as he leaped over the lane fence.

"What is that little puppy back here again for?" she demanded anxiously, "for I know it's the same chap you took up to the village yesterday. Oh, father, there is some trick being played on you I am sure!"

Then Uncle Asa gave the much-worried Hazel

another exhibition of emotional insanity, for he grasped her and threw her up on his shoulders, gave a hop, skip, and jump, then lowered the struggling form, kissed her face hit or miss four times, and set her down.

"Kingdom's 'most come," he almost shouted. "Don't say a word to Martha. Keep mum. I'm goin' to the village, 'n' want ye to meet me half way thar jist two hours from now on the sly, 'n' keep whist all the time." Then he hurried into the house, up to his room, unlocked an ancient oak chest, found the original deed of the Bear Hole Swamp land, put on a clean shirt, and hastened away to the village. He set the squire at work filling out a deed to Mr. Leon Otero, residence blank, summoned Sam for witness to his own signature (forgetting that his wife must also sign with him), made both Sam and Squire Phinney swear to inviolate secrecy regarding this important act, and by the time Otero appeared a half-hour later, the deed that was to play so peculiar and far-reaching a part in Oakdale's history, also of the heart annals of Miss Hazel Webster, was ready for him. And so anxious was he, apparently, to get the business consummated and depart, the wily Otero never noticed that Mrs. Asa Webster's signature was missing. The money, all in fifty and one hundred dollar

bills, was counted both by the Squire and Uncle Asa; as a matter of ordinary politeness they all shook hands with Otero, and he hastened across the street to the hotel.

And this brief but exciting visit to Oakdale was the first and last one ever made by him!

"He's got Uncle Levi to take him up to the noon train west," Sam stated after Otero had left the Squire's office. "The little cuss don't jist like our sort o' folks, I cal'late."

"Nor B'ar Hole Swamp either I guess," added Uncle Asa. "He war the wust busted pup I ever seen when he fetched out on't yesterday, thanks to you, Sam."

"Wal, the feller was puttin' on too many airs, 'n' lookin' too slick to suit me," returned Sam, "so I jist thought I'd gin him the Entered Apprentice degree, 'n' take him down a trifful. But what the devil does he want o' B'ar Hole Swamp, 'n' how'd ye make him pay sich an ungodly price, Uncle Asa? 'Twas 'most highway robbery!"

Then Uncle Asa looked at Sam while a broad grin spread over his face.

"Thar's a woodchuck in the haymow, Sam," he said slowly, "'n' I've got holt o' his hind leg. Thar's suthin else I got holt on, Sam," he continued, smiling even more, "jist you go over 'n' fotch me

that sartificate o' mining stock you've got framed 'n' I'll gin ye zackly five hundred for't now."

"No, I won't, Uncle Asa," Sam answered bluntly, "fer it looks like the mine's struck it rich 'n' I'll keep the stock."

"All off, nothin' doin' then," returned Uncle Asa, laughing heartily. "Offer's only good this minute, not to-morrer."

Much more of this cheerful badinage was exchanged between these three old cronies, then after waiting until he saw Otero depart so that he couldn't be waylaid by him when homeward bound, Uncle Asa left the village. Half way home, and as he expected, he found Hazel awaiting him beneath a roadside apple tree.

"Hooray, girlie, hooray, hooray!" he shouted, now running up and enclosing her in his arms. "Kingdom's come, 'n' I've got the money! It's yours, every cent on't, nine thousand dollars, 'n' it's goin' into the Barre bank to-morrow, hooray! Come kiss your old fool dad jist once now!"

Then and after this unique exhibition of feeling, he drew the roll of bills from beneath his shirt, handed it to Hazel, choked, bit his lips, turned away, and two tears stole down his wrinkled face.

"I'm a derned old fool, ain't I, Hazel?" he added, now laughing again. "But I was 'nuff fer

that little weasel that tackled me this mornin', 'n' —'n' the man that sent you the books 'n' you've been skeered on all 'long put up the job to save your money by sellin' B'ar Hole Swamp to that little rat you watched with me. Thar now, will ye b'lieve he's wuth trustin', or won't ye?"

"I'll believe anything to see you so happy, father," came from Hazel, embracing and kissing him again. Then she, too, began to laugh with wet eyes.

And now the feminine sex asserted itself.

"Is — is that Mr. Whipple coming to Oakdale soon, do you know, father?"

"I dunno's he'll ever come agin," answered her father vaguely. "If I'd ben treated by a gal ez you did him I wouldn't chase her 'nother rod. I don't much think you'll ever set eyes on him agin."

"Then what you said about his admiring me must be all nonsense," the keen-witted girl returned, "or else he will come again. Any man worth thinking twice about can't be choked off by one rebuff. And I didn't repulse him; was just cool, that's all."

"Wuss'n that, jist turned your back on him that day down to the shore 'n' let him whistle fer company while ye gals cut sticks," asserted her father, smiling at his well beloved and only child. "I watched ye from out pullin' pots. But I ain't wor-

ryin' 'bout him a minute," he added after a pause. "That feller don't need no keeper over him ez you thought I did. His head's level, you kin bet, 'n' he ain't a mite skeered o' little gal like yew, he ain't. 'N' now, Hazel, let's set down 'n' count that roll o' money, you 'n' I. I want the comfort of fingerin' Kingdom Come jist once more, slow 'n' easy."

Then down under the apple tree he squatted with Hazel beside him to enjoy what he never had before in his life, and never expected to enjoy again — the counting of so much money all by himself, slowly, and to enjoy the sensation.

"I think I did a perty slick trick to make that snaky little Mexican gin up so much," he asserted after the counting, "'n' I tucked on five hundred jist to square Sam for his mine stock. Also as pay for sendin' this chap into the swamp ez Sam did. It tuckered the cuss out, 'n' gin me the nicest sort o' chance to sass him, 'n' I did, too! Hain't had so much fun since I had the measles." And Uncle Asa laughed again in boyish enjoyment of his meeting with and getting the better of Otero.

"Mr. Whipple put the job up," he continued after this. "War doin' it the day that popinjay friend o' yours from Barre saw him, when he come here agin, and chased me down to the shore, 'n'

'splained jist how this Otero ud show up, 'n' how to tackle him.

"'N' now," he added, watching Hazel's face sharply, "Mr. Whipple's gone out West whar Injuns is thicker'n flies in B'ar Hole Swamp, 'n' most likely he'll get scalped. I don't s'pose you care though."

Then Hazel glanced at her father's impassive face while a new sensation tingled in her feelings, for she read his thoughts like an open book.

"I am sorry I mistrusted him," she answered demurely. "I will tell him so, too, when he comes again, and — and I understand you hope he will ask me to marry him, father?"

"Not less you like him 'nuff to go barefoot if he asks ye to, girlie," returned her father soberly. "Gittin' married is the whole o' your life, Hazel, 'n' till one or t'other is laid away, 'n' ye must go keerful, mighty keerful, I tell ye. I like Mr. Whipple. I did the fust go off, 'n' he's proved himself square's a brick. It's up to you, though, whether you like him or not. All I kin tell ye is he said he'd walk a good many miles jist to win one o' your smiles, 'n' said it outen his heart, too."

Then Hazel grew rose-red again for somehow this man's eyes had haunted her for many days.

"I ain't goin' to worry a mite 'bout you two," Uncle Asa continued, smiling at the telltale color on Hazel's face. "Only jist 'bout this money now. It'll stay next to my skin till I git to Barre to-morrow, 'n' then it goes into the bank in your name. I'd go to-night, only the bank's closed when I git thar. I don't think I'll sleep a wink till it's in the bank, though. Now, let's go home."

Once there, and acting nervously, as he now did, it was not long ere Martha's suspicions were aroused by both his and Hazel's peculiar conduct and she began to question first Hazel, then Hazel's father. From the former she obtained no satisfaction, however, as might be expected, and not until evening was any obtained from Uncle Asa.

"You are keeping something from me, Asa," she demanded of him rather tartly when the chance came and Hazel away, "and now I mean to know what it is! What was that little man here for this morning, and why did you change your shirt 'n' hurry up to the village right after him, I want to know? And Hazel, too, after you, 'n' gone 'most three hours! What have you been doing? I've a right to know, 'n' I want to know now!"

Then Uncle Asa looked at his much-disliked better half, calmly and serenely.

"I had business with that man," he explained

slowly, "'n' went up town to git paid some money he owed me, that's all."

"How much?" demanded Martha in rasping voice.

"Oh, a few thousand dollars," answered Uncle Asa, a queer suspicion flashing into his mind. "Why do ye want to know, Martha?"

"And you've got it with ye?"

"Sartin, 'n' mean to keep it with me, too, till I go to Barre to-morrow."

"No, you won't, Asa Webster," replied his spouse viciously, "nothing of the sort! Somebody'll break into the house 'n' rob you to-night if you do!"

"What'll I do with it then?" returned Uncle Asa, calmly scanning her face.

"Why, hide it, of course, where I hide money when we leave the house — under that loose brick in the front-room fireplace," almost commanded Martha, "then it'll be safe."

And then the sinister suspicion in Uncle Asa's mind became almost a certainty.

"I'll do it, Martha," he answered meekly, "do it jist to please ye, the last thing 'fore I go to bed. It'll be safe 'nuff on me till then, I cal'late."

And that evening, sitting along on the embowered front porch and smoking his cob pipe, as was his

custom summer evenings, back to him came the evil look that he had detected in Martha's eyes when admitting he had so large a sum of money. He also recalled her miserly ways during the few years of their life together, her reputation previously, how every dollar given her by him or taken in from sale of eggs, poultry, or anything, vanished like water in sand and nothing to show for it; how their table was scrimped to the most meager of food, Hazel's board payments also disappearing the same way, and many other suspicious occurrences.

"I don't like that sharky look," he muttered softly to himself now. "Thar's suthin brewin', that's sartin! You're cal'latin' to git holt o' that money, Martha Baker!" So disturbing was this suspicion, he arose suddenly and started down the lane. At its foot and out of sight from his house, he halted and glanced up at the starlit sky.

"Curis, curis," he said to himself again, "how the love o' money'll make thieves 'n' lunatics, 'most, out o' folks. I hate to b'lieve it o' you, Martha, but you're plannin' to steal, my God, you be, 'n' it's the end o' you 'n' I! The end, the end! Mebbe it's better so, too, fer Hazel! It's been hell for her all 'long, 'n' I sha'n't miss ye, not a minute!"

Then, overwrought with the shameful horror of what he now believed, a cold sweat moistened his

face and hands; he started rapidly across the meadow to his boathouse, lit a small lamp he kept there, cut a few dozen strips of brown paper the size of bills, rolled them up, put a ten-dollar one on the outside, tied the roll with a bit of fish line, and returned to the lane.

At its foot, and much to his joy, he met Hazel.

"Thank God ye come out, girlie," he whispered with trembling voice and grasping her arm. "I war so wantin' to see ye 'lone."

"Why, what is it, father?" she asked in quivering tones. "What has happened?"

"Suthin horrible," he whispered back, "but I've got to b'lieve it, 'n' prove it too! Martha wants me to hide that money in the front-room fireplace 'n' to-night — sometime — she's goin' to steal it. Now don't say a word! I've got a roll o' paper 'n' bill outside fixed up; I'm goin' to hide it under the loose brick she wants me to. Jist you come to my room in your stockin's arter she's gone to bed, 'n' wait 'n' listen with me. When she thinks I'm asleep, she'll go down the back stairs, I figger — they're furtherest away from my room —'n' then you 'n' I'll come to the top o' the front ones 'n' listen. All I want is proof she's become a thief, 'n' that's the end o' her 'n' I."

Then, without a word of reply to this shame-

ful but probable supposition, Hazel wound her arms around her father's neck and kissed him. They were as one now in wish, spirit, and mutual humiliation.

She kept hold of his hand, too, as they walked up the lane and found Martha on the porch awaiting them.

"Whar you ben?" she almost demanded as Uncle Asa came first up the steps.

"I've ben worryin' 'bout what you said 'bout that money," he answered calmly, "'n' took a walk to look 'round. I guess I'd best do ez you say, 'n' hide it in the fireplace. It's gittin' 'most bedtime, 'n' I'll do it now." And without more words he went inside.

Martha also followed him in, watched him put the bogus roll of money under the loose brick, return the firedogs into place again, and pile the white birch wood upon them as before.

And so another trap was set — this time to catch one whose detection was to cost more in shame and humiliation than all the money meant to Uncle Asa.

He locked the door as Hazel came in, drew a heavy settle in front of it, saw that the windows were fastened, went out and locked the two kitchen doors, then the three ascended the front stairs in

Indian file and separated with the usual "Good-nights."

An hour later, in loose wrapper and stockinged feet, Hazel tiptoed softly into her father's room, closed the door to a quarter-inch crack, and sat down beside it listening.

This expected denouement or exposure meant more to her than to her father!

One hour, two hours, seemingly, passed to that listening, also keenly humiliated father and daughter, then Hazel's acute young ears caught the faint creak of an opened door, one, two, three lesser ones from the back stairs, and then only the slow solemn "tick, tock" of the tall clock in the parlor below.

And never afterwards in her life did she listen to that slow-beating monitor of time in the stilly night without recalling this crucial moment!

Five minutes, each a seeming hour long, passed, then up from the parlor came a faint pat as the sticks of wood in the fireplace were taken out and laid down. Then Hazel arose and beckoned to her father, barely visible by the window. He shook his head, however, then motioned her to go out alone.

Very gently now Hazel drew the door open,

like a cat she crept to the carpeted front stairs, down them to the open parlor door, and there, barely outlined by the star light, she saw Martha kneeling in front of the fireplace!

She next saw her lift the loose brick, seize the roll of money-covered paper, and begin the returning of the white birch sticks to place on the firedogs.

Then Hazel, thus convinced that her hated stepmother was a thief, with every nerve in her body quivering from the horror of it and all it meant, crept back to her father's room, whispered, "I saw her take it," kissed him, and then, overcome by the strain of this tragedy, she sank to the floor at his feet — sobbing.

Up from the hall below and now sounding to Uncle Asa like "Nevermore — nevermore — nevermore," came the slow, solemn clock beats.

And so it was to his life with the now despicable Martha, for he never saw her again.

SHE SAW MARTHA KNEELING IN FRONT OF THE FIREPLACE.
Page 214.

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CHAPTER XVIII

THE gray light of coming morn was at hand when Hazel felt herself wakened by her father's touch, and saw him dressed in his best, with hat on and boots in hand, beside her bed.

"Here's a paper to give to Martha when she gits up," he whispered, handing it to her as she rose up. "I'm goin' to Barre now. I'll git back by middle o' the arternoon 'n' go to my boathouse. Ef Martha's here, then yew be thar by three o'clock. Ef you ain't, I'll know she's gone, 'n' come to the house. You kin read the paper arter I'm gone." Then he stooped, kissed Hazel's forehead, and without another word tiptoed out and down the stairs.

And Hazel, watching, saw him go to the barn, emerge with the harnessed horse, attach him to their light buggy, put a gun in, and drive away. Then she read the note she held. It was brief and to the point like all of Uncle Asa's utterances, and said:—

"Martha, you and I can't live under the same

roof no longer. You can go to your sister's in Goshen or where you choose. I shall have the farm apprized and send you one-third of that. If this don't satisfy you, take the law on me. ASA WEBSTER."

Hazel, too, had her own sense of pride and as all the years while this woman had been hateful to her now returned to add abhorrence of this act of theft, as her father would say, "her dander riz," and with it a determination to mete out a little vengeance on personal account.

No one else was astir in the house as yet, and whether Martha had discovered how she had been trapped was also unknown to Hazel. Neither did she care. The intended theft had been committed, and its criminality and despicable meanness was just as great in Hazel's mind as if all the money had been stolen.

Only for a few moments did Hazel now consider how she could best humiliate this shameless woman, then wrote on a slip of paper:—

"I hope I shall never be obliged to set eyes on you again. You can take your two boys and all personal things belonging to you, and the sooner you go the better. You can also explain why you

go in any way you please. I don't expect you will tell the truth. If you do not leave town before noon I believe father will have you arrested. I saw you steal the money. HAZEL."

Then Hazel dressed, pinned the two notes together, locked the door of her own room, left the double message on the dining-room table where Martha must surely find it, and stole out of the house just as the sun peeped over the hilltops.

It had been a night and an experience so abhorrent and so humiliating that it seemed as if she had grown years older during that ten hours' lapse of time.

Once well away from the house, or at the foot of the lane she paused to consider what to do next, and just now, also, it seemed as if a great load had been lifted from her soul. Here, too, and for the first time since awakened by her father, she began to realize that it was morning, that the brook close by was chattering away as usual, the birds piping their morning welcome to the rising sun from all about, and quite unconscious of the horrible happening. A crisp sea breeze blew up from the salt marsh. A bobolink rose from a thicket of ferns just across the main road, circled around, then lit on the tip of a tree limb and began its wondrously

sweet song. Nature was still existent. God still ruled the Universe!

With this impress of morning and the birth of a new day, Hazel's spirits began to catch the bobolink's note, and she to see another and brighter future just ahead with the deep and abiding love of her father to bless it. Then, too, as she now started on up the road, she began to grow thankful that he was to escape the cross he had asked her to help him bear. She still had him as he had her, and now their life together could be like the song of the brook and the birds once more.

With this rising of her spirits and vision of another and happier life, Stacy's face began to emerge from forgetfulness, and the part he had played in this drama to recur to her. It had all come so suddenly, too; this strange, dapper little fellow's appearance and meeting with her father; the hilarious conduct over some bargain, the reason for which she knew not; his visit to the village and return with so great a sum of money, all obtained through some mysterious influence or aid from Stacy. And then the end of that night of suspense!

And now, too, her own conduct and distrust of Stacy, also lack of faith in her father's opinion

of him, returned to her. And what was the meaning of his sudden and unusual interest in her father? Was it but a means to an end, and her good will, her favor, and herself eventually; or that end an ultimatum? For this busy business man so to plot and plan to assist her father from pure philanthropy seemed almost impossible, and from what her father had asserted that this bold fellow had said and thought of her, there could be but one conclusion, which was that she was the magnet that had drawn his aid and interest.

And then what meant the books and music sent her without even his card?

And just now, with the pulse of young life within her, and sure that this imperious young man meant to win her if he could, meant to say to her "I want you, body and soul," Hazel began to feel herself blush, while every nerve tingled.

Then a sense of rebellion at all this encompassing of plot and plan to win her favor, now followed. She was not for sale! No favors shown her father or aid to him could avail in this capture of herself, if captured she was! Though loving her father devotedly and ready to make any sacrifice for him, she was still mistress of her own fate and future, and no assertive and bold

fellow like this Stacy need imagine favors to her father could win one iota of love from her! Not even an extra heart throb!

By this time, she was half way to the village, and here on the very hillock where Stacy had stood and scanned that hamlet and the opening valley and vista of ocean beyond, while building his air castle of a future city, Hazel now paused to consider her own immediate plans; also to realize that she was hungry. To go on to Molly Bascom's and be welcomed to breakfast there was the easiest thing possible, but what excuse was there for it, and how could she explain so unusual an act? Some explanation of what was to happen at home must be made to her friends in the near future, yet Hazel dared not decide upon one without consulting her father.

"I've run away from home, Molly," she said laughingly to that chum when her home was reached. "Had a spat with Martha — you know how I adore her — and so ran away for a few hours. Don't ask me a word about it! I just want breakfast, then I'm going to walk my mad fit off, and go home again!"

And true to the schoolmate bond of friendship between these two, Hazel obtained her needed morning meal, passed a couple of hours with the

vivacious Molly, and then departed to walk off her supposed anger.

"I hope father will be willing to have the truth told," she said to herself, when well away from the Bascom home, "and yet perhaps it's best not to do so."

And now how to pass this time until her father's return came next for consideration. It was now only a little past eight. She knew that he could not leave Barre until after the bank opened at nine. It would take him certainly three hours with their slow horse over the hilly road, and that meant noon before he got back. Then, after deciding that she would follow the Barre road and meet her father, Hazel happened to recall what Stacy had told her of the picture of herself on the blackboard of her schoolhouse, and straightway decided she had ample time to go and expunge it; also make a guess as to what boy was so enamored of her.

She found the rude drawing still extant where Stacy had said it was, and even as he had done, so she now sat down, looked long at it, read the legend beneath, "My teacher, I love her," then laughed heartily.

"He said it reminded him of his own boyhood and a dose of the same first love malady," she now said aloud, and then, true to her sex, began to

wonder what sort of looking girl this teacher was who had captured Stacy's boyish heart, and whether he had fully recovered from it or not.

"It's Schuyler Crowell," she added, now examining the scrawled words beneath the picture. "I know his 'M' and 'I' beyond question," then shook with another spasm of laughter at the thought of this round-faced, chubby boy of fourteen having heart troubles of this nature. She tried also to recall some indications of it in his conduct the previous term, and now in the light of this revelation a few recurred to her. How quietly studious he had appeared the latter part of it. How on three Monday mornings she had found a bunch of arbutus on her desk, and wishing to thank the giver of the flowers she so prized, was unable to find out who brought them. Then, and as a final corroboration, she recalled how apparently sorry to have school close Schuyler appeared, and instead of trooping down with the rest at final dismissal, how he had hung around the schoolhouse until she departed, and then gone his way alone. No thought of this peculiar influence had come to her then — now with this disclosure it was plain enough; and scanning the grotesque drawing once more and thinking how this quiet, timid boy had come here to ease his

troubled heart in this way, instead of laughing again, somehow it almost seemed pathetic.

A little retrospection of her own life and its sorrows came next: her mother's death eleven years previous, her almost unbearable sense of loss then, her father's tears and gloom, his well-meant, perhaps, but unfortunate bringing of a stepmother to their desolate home, and its unhappy outcome. That was past now, even though its ending had come through a shameful horror, and she was never likely again to look upon this woman she had come so to despise.

And just then, as if to prove that all shame, sorrow, and disgrace is but an avenging Nemesis, she heard a team nearing the schoolhouse and going to the window saw Uncle Levi's carryall, and in it Martha and the two boys, evidently being conveyed to the depot, and Martha's eyes were red and swollen from weeping.

On this instant, also, a quick pang of regret for the sarcastic and quite contemptuous note she had addressed to this woman, came to Hazel. It couldn't be recalled, however. The blow had been dealt to this erring woman whose worst sin was so to love money that she would steal it. And this was the end.

And just now, also, as the carryall and the dejected and bowed-down face of Martha vanished, Hazel felt her own eyes fill.

"She made me hate her," she asserted finally in self-defense, "but"— and biting her lips —"I am sorry I wrote the note. Father's was enough."

A little longer only she sat there in that lone byway temple — her own kingdom by the roadside — then glancing at her watch (once her mother's), she saw it was almost eleven, and, forgetting to erase her boy admirer's chalk drawing, she hurried out, then crossed the village and took the woods-bordered road up over the low mountains to Barre.

She did not now feel afraid of its isolation, or the fact that after leaving Oakdale valley not a house was to be found alongside it until five miles away, and on top of the range stood a charcoal burner's hut; for like all country-born girls, byway roads, woods-bordered, held no terrors — not even of tramps, for few ever came to this hamlet. One mile, two miles she trudged onward along this winding, up-hill, partially shaded and quite lonely road; then coming to a kind of canyon with thick overhang where a hillside spring, long trough, and log tub offered cooling temptation, she paused to drink and bathe her face and hands, then to find an available seat, and to rest.

"Father must come along soon," she said, consulting her watch again. "It's almost one, and if he started back by half-past nine, he will."

But another hour passed and no father came. Then, so peculiar is solitude that Hazel, a good deal unstrung by loss of sleep, shame, sorrow, regret, and other unusual happenings, began to lose her courage and imagine all sorts of terrors. First, what if something had happened to her father? She had seen him take his gun, so he must have feared some enemy might be met. And such a sum of money, too, that he carried — nine thousand, five hundred dollars! Almost enough to tempt an honest man to rob, she thought. And what about this Mexican, Otero? And why mightn't he have suspected how soon and by which way her father would go to put so much money in a bank, and plan to meet and rob him?

The bugaboo of imaginary danger once started grows fast, and Hazel now, nervous as she was, waiting, watching, listening for a coming team and hearing none, soon attained a state of mind in which she was ready to scream at the sound of a squirrel scampering through the undergrowth, or the whir of a partridge. Go on, she dared not! Return, she would not as yet, so sat in dumb and rapidly-increasing distress of mind.

And what a medley of horrible sounds the woods now held! A frog croaking in some morass, or a squirrel's bark became a hidden human being of evil intent, calling to another. The caw of a crow was sinister! Even the rustle of leaves in the wind sounded ominous! Another half-hour passed, and poor Hazel felt faint from mingled suspense and dread, then came the distant patter of a horse's hoofs, the rattle of wheels, and soon from around a bend she saw her father nearing. To dart out from the bank and run to meet him was her next act. He halted his horse sharply, and said, "Hullo, girlie! Why, what ye doin' here?" And the next moment Hazel had leaped into the buggy, then into his lap, with arms about his neck, and sobbing.

To her the world now held but one person, and she was in his arms!

"Why, what's happened?" came the query from her father as he began to stroke and pat Hazel's head, then kissed her. "What on arth is the matter, house burned, or what?"

"No, nothing of that sort," responded Hazel, cheering up, "only I left home soon after you did, got breakfast at Molly's, stayed at the schoolhouse a while to kill time, and came up here to meet you. I began to get scared, I guess; it's so lonesome here.

She's gone," she added the next moment, "and the boys with her. Uncle Levi took them to the station. I saw them pass the schoolhouse and she'd been crying."

"O' course, o' course," returned her father soberly, "'n' I'm sorry she had to. I'm sorry any woman ever has to cry. But it's best so. Martha was like an achin' tooth to you 'n' I, Hazel, 'n' o' course it hurt all 'round to hev it yanked out. Now it's out, let's forget it 'n' start fresh. I'm goin' to do the right thing by Martha, ez I said, 'n' soon ez it kin be done, too. I've got the money, your money, whar it's safe, 'n' now we kin keep house 'n' hev a lot o' comfort. Ye got to stop keepin' school, though, now." Then he drew from his pocket a bank book and handed it to Hazel.

"Why, it's ten thousand dollars," she exclaimed, glancing first at her name on the cover, then inside, "and you only had nine thousand, five hundred!"

"Wal, yes, that's so, but I've ben scrapin' up a *leetle* fer ye 'long back, 'n' I wanted to make it even money," he answered tenderly, "'n' now I won't hev to worry no more 'bout your futur."

Then, as if all clouds had now rolled away from their sky, he kissed her once more, picked up the reins and drove on.

Half way to Oakdale, and where an outlook point was reached, from which the vista of valley and bordering ocean was visible, he halted again.

"Say, girlie," he said, with a droll smile and wee little twinkle in his eyes, "do ye know what I fust thought when you pounced out onto me so sudden up back?"

"No," she returned, also smiling; "I couldn't guess. What was it?"

"Why, I cal'lated you must 'a' heerd Mr. Whipple had ben scalpt by Injins, that's what."

"Well, you are wrong, father, all wrong," she answered decidedly; "Mr. Whipple isn't in my thoughts at all!"

"O' course not, course not," he responded soothingly; "how could he be? That was only my guess!"

Then he chirruped to the horse and on they went again.

CHAPTER XIX

WHEN Uncle Asa and Hazel returned to their hid-away home in Maple Dell, both feeling like school children at the close of a term, they found that Martha had prepared and left for them a rather unique and also solemn surprise, for the parlor was arranged as if for a funeral. All chairs from other rooms, except rockers, had been carried to the parlor and arranged in rows; Hazel's banjo, auto-harp, and all books and music taken out and piled on the kitchen table; the curtains drawn; the center-table set close to the fireplace and on it lay the family Bible, open, with a vase of flowers beside that. To add a suggestive illusion, the tall clock had been stopped at ten-thirty exactly!

"Wal," drawled Uncle Asa, smiling, as he surveyed this arrangement, "Martha's fixed things 'bout ez they'd orter be for 'n occasion o' this sort, 'cept the corpse. Wonder if she figgered or war hopin' I'd drop dead out o' sudden grief to finish the layout?"

Then going to the center-table, he found in the

open Bible an even more spiteful addition to this parting shot — her wedding ring!

"Kinder wanted to do a little scratchin', didn't ye, Martha?" he ejaculated at sight of this, "'n' tell me ye war dern glad to git shet o' me, eh? Wal, thar's two on us feelin' that way, anyhow!

"Say, Hazel," he added, glancing at her as she raised the shades, "your dear stepmother's left her weddin' ring to spite me, but she didn't leave the watch 'n' chain I give her on that suspicious occasion, I notice? Curis, curis," he continued musingly, "what a make-up that woman had, anyhow! Here I let her hev 'bout all the money that cum in fer nine years, 'most of which she salted; I clothed 'n' eddicated them two boys o' hern, 'sides puttin' up with all their devilment, 'n' now, not satisfied with tryin' to steal your sheet anchor, that money, she sets out to kick me once fer good measure! 'Bout all she lacked to be perfect war horns, two hoofs, 'n' a forked tail, I cal'late.

"I s'pose she'll say all sorts o' nasty things 'bout yew 'n' I, Hazel," he continued, smiling at her now, "but we'll let her do the talkin', won't we, girlie? It'll be a case o' givin' a calf rope enough, I figger?"

"No, she won't dare," responded Hazel, who understood women's nature better than her father, "for I, too, left her a note telling her I saw her

steal the money, and she knows people will believe me sooner than her.

"Why, she's a fool," she added a moment later, opening the clock to start it, "for she's left both our notes and that make-believe roll of money tied to the clock pendulum! Now we can prove why she was asked to go away! No, we shall never hear a word from her, father!"

And the keen-witted Hazel measured her much-abhorred stepmother aright, for never a word of explanation came from her to any one in Oakdale, or any communication except to Squire Phinney, requesting him to sell her former home, now rented, which he later on did.

And so closed this peculiar woman's connection with Uncle Asa and with Oakdale as well.

He was true to his promise and idea of justice, also, for he at once authorized Phinney to obtain the aid of two other honorable men, make a fair appraisal of his old, weather-worn house and small farm, and a year later that factotum of Oakdale's legal affairs paid Goshen a visit, tendered the obstreperous Martha a sum equivalent to her dower right in Uncle Asa's estate, and received in return a legal release from such rights, duly signed, witnessed, and afterward recorded in the archives of Oakdale.

Of course such a happening astounded that quiet hamlet as naught else ever had done, although Mrs. Phinney and several other wise matrons shook their heads or nodded mysteriously while discussing it, and asserted that it was no more than they had expected all along. Also that Uncle Asa had been duped to begin with, and the only wonder was why he had stood it as long as he had.

"I've no explanation to make or a word to say about the affair," Hazel responded to the eager inquiries of Molly Bascom and the rest of her girl friends. "I've never liked my stepmother, as every one knows, but I've had to endure her, however, as best I could for father's sake. Now that she has seen fit to depart and can't defend herself, I shall be charitable enough to say 'amen' and nothing more to all alike."

And true to the nobility of her character, Hazel never did say anything else.

Uncle Asa also made haste to fill the domestic gap in his home by engaging the services of Aunt Sally Perkins, a spinster sister of Molly Bascom's mother, who for a modest stipend was glad to accept so good a home and become a combination of chaperon and mother to Hazel; also housekeeper. She was eminently pious, feared the Lord, prayed earnestly for everybody and everything each night,

and the only point of difference between herself and Uncle Asa was because he ignored the need of saying grace before every meal.

Hazel appeared in the church choir each Sunday, her auto-harp and banjo were heard more frequently in the house, Uncle Asa became more droll and smiling, Hazel's girl friends came oftener to Maple Dell, and the dove of peace and angel of happiness both were daily visitors.

And then one day Uncle Asa made a characteristic proposition to Hazel.

"Summer's more'n half gone, girlie," he said to her, "'n' it's 'most the last o' August. Now let's yew 'n' I git up a sort o' picnic to celebrate some things as is turnin' out to be blessin's. Yew invite a few o' yer gal friends, 'n' two or three fellers, o' course, to balance up, all my two boats'll carry, 'n' we'll all go down to the shore, sing, go bathin', dig clams, brile some lobs, 'n' ez the moon's 'most full, come home by the light on't. What do ye say?"

"I've a better plan," answered Hazel smilingly, after considering this one, "and that is, you and I will go all by ourselves and do what you suggest. You are good enough company for me; I am happiest with you alone, so let us picnic together."

"Wal, jist ez ye say, girlie," returned her father benignly; "you are sartinly good 'nuff company

fer me, 'n' to-morrer we'll start 'bout ten when the tide sarves."

He was up early the next day, made many trips between home and boathouse, carrying all sorts of things for convenience and comfort, and when all was ready and Hazel followed him to it, she smiled at the array of cushions where she was to sit in the stern of his small boat over which he had rigged a canvas canopy to protect her from the sun. To add to the picturesque touch, he had also tacked strips of old sail-cloth around the gunwales to hold in place a fringing row of cat-tails. He assisted Hazel to her seat as if she were a queen. She grasped the tiller ropes, he the oars, and away they went.

"Ye needn't mind steerin'," he said a little later, halting his strokes and handing her her banjo. "'Twon't be low water till 'most two, we got lots o' time, 'n' I'd rather hev you play 'n' sing 'n' I'll go slower 'n' do the steerin'. Play suthin lively. I feel that way, myself."

He certainly did also, for he joined his voice with hers in the score of time-worn darky songs she now rendered with gay abandon; the bobolinks, rail-birds, and marsh-swallows rose, circled, sang, and peeped all about and above them; the crisp sea breeze blew in to add zest, and had they been lovers

instead of prosy father and daughter, they couldn't have been more in tune with time, place, and anticipation.

He was like a lover, also, all that bright summer day to his well-beloved "Girlie," waited on her hand and foot, and while she insisted on donning her bathing suit in his old fish house up back of the beach, to wash the clams he dug, that and set the table were all that she was allowed to do.

"Yew're my Sunday gal to-day, Hazel," he asserted smilingly, "'n' yew 'n' I are sorter sweethearts, too, so ye jist got to be waited on so I kin feel I'm a young feller agin, jist once."

When the clams were steamed just right, lobsters broiled to a turn, and coffee made, they two feasted, as well they could now, and after that with Hazel in a hammock he had strung up in the grove, Uncle Asa lit his cob pipe, seated himself at the foot of a tree in the shade and, as might be expected, became philosophic.

"Thar's nothin' like the smell o' salt water 'n' lookin' out over the ocean 'n' surf to make a body fergit everything else, girlie," he said, "speshly when ye hev it all to yerself. Now, I figgered yew'd like some young folks 'long for company, 'n' let me wait on the bunch. But this is a lot better, 'n' makes me feel more like kickin' up my heels."

"That's why I said we two would come and no one else, father," returned Hazel. "I know you best, and what you enjoy best."

"Ye do, girlie, ye do sartin," he responded, well pleased and smiling, "'n' now I'm goin' to tell ye suthin I never did afore nor to nobody else o' course, 'n' it's this. If thar's any more darn fool things'n one man kin do in this world, it's what two will blunder into, I'm satisfied. Now when your mother died o' course I figgered you'd need, 'n' grow up happier by havin' some one to take her place, ez it war, 'n' I married Martha — or ez I rec'lect how it cum 'bout, she did the trick, 'n' that's what it was. Now I was — wal, let's fergit it fast ez we kin, only it leads up to 'nother matter that's on my mind — your futur. Now with that money I've got safe in the bank for ye — 'n' it seemed like Kingdom Come to me to git it — you won't never be 'bleeged to marry fer a home. Ye may, o' course, 'n' I hope ye will if jist the right man wants ye, but go slow 'n' be keerful, mighty keerful, 'bout doin' so. Gittin' married is takin' a life sentence to live 'n' love one man. That is, love him a spell 'n' be the best o' friends arter, that is all 'twill amount to, ez ye must 'spect. Ye want to go 'bout it with your eyes open, too, not let your feelin's count fer much either —'tain't safe; they'll fool ye,

sure, ez Natur planned to hev 'em. 'N' this leads me up to that feller, Whipple.

"I ain't pryin' inter your heart feelin's, Hazel," he continued more earnestly after a pause. "I couldn't ef I wanted to, 'n' I don't want to. Only I mean to give ye the best advice I kin, 'n' ye must do ez ye feel is best. Now I like him, he's square 'n' honest, 'n' true blue. But he's kinder bossy, high strung, 'n' must be looked up to 'n' 'lowed his own way. Gin him that, 'n' he'll be a noble sort o' hero, snub him some 'n' he'll git sulky. That's his make-up ez I've measured him, 'n' I think I'm right. Now he's done me a good turn, nobody ever did or could do one like it, 'n' got me the money I war skinned out on over twofold. 'N' it war money I had laid up fer yew. O' course I feel grateful, I'd orter. Now back o' all that, 'twa'n't fer me entirely he done it, 'twar fer you, Hazel, I'm sartin, 'n' that man's figgering on winnin' yew ez pay. I don't blame him, neither. If I was him, 'n' knowin' yer make-up ez I do, I'd sell my soul to git ye 'n' call it a good bargain. But that's what ye must figger on. He'll be here 'fore long, 'n' when he comes he'll come courtin', mark my words!"

"I know it," interrupted Hazel eagerly, "or I've half believed it so some time, and what you say convinces me what his intentions are. He is a nice

enough man, no doubt. There are some things about him I like also; he is refined and honorable, I am sure, but he is as you say, masterful, and wants his own way and — I wouldn't marry such a man if he were the last one on earth and crawled on hands and knees from Oakdale depot to get me — never, never!

"There is something else I'm going to tell you, father," she continued more tenderly, "and it's this: You have all your life long been the most loving of fathers to me, have scrimped and saved money to protect me from want when you are gone. You worried your poor dear heart sore because you thought it lost, and now in return, and for what few years you have left, I am going to be yours only, and do all in my power to make you happy. If Mr. Whipple got me he'd want to take me away and leave you alone and — and, father, he couldn't make me love him enough to do that in a thousand years, and I mean it, too, if it were the last words I had to utter!"

And so she did, just then.

"There is another thing you haven't thought of, father," she added more calmly, "and it's this. Mr. Whipple came here to buy a power site for Barre, and North, or Curtis, who sold you the mine stock, heard of it and planned to get ahead of him

in the matter. Mr. Whipple found it out, came here again, hinted around that it was Bear Hole Swamp he intended to buy, and actually bought Rocky Glen gorge for his dam site. He also guessed that this man North or his partner, Otero, would be taken in as they really were, and buy your swamp to get the better of him or his firm. It has all worked out as Mr. Whipple planned, and this swindler, Curtis, or Otero, has bought what you were glad to sell and nobody else wants. Now my guess in the matter is that Mr. Whipple has gone to all this trouble fully as much to get square with this trickster, Curtis, as to do you a good turn. And while I am thankful he did, and you got your money back, he mustn't expect me to feel obligated to marry him on that account anyhow. Isn't that so, father?"

"Wal, that's 'bout the size on't, girlie," returned Uncle Asa, "only Mr. Whipple didn't really have any call to put the job up. He'd got the site he wanted, my money or yewrn wa'n't hisn to worry 'bout, 'n' ef he hadn't got his eye on yew 'n' knew, ez I told him, 'twas yewr heritage I'd got buried in this no-good mine, why should he bother himself at all? No, Hazel, it is ez ye say, ye needn't feel noways in debt to Mr. Whipple, but I am, jist the same. Howsomever, let's fergit it fer now. Ye can't cook a rabbit till ye ketch it. Mr. Whipple

hain't ketched you yit, 'n' my idee is he'll hev a middlin' lively chase 'fore he does. Yew are, as Sam Gates sez, sweeter'n peaches an' cream, yew are all I'm livin' fer, but when it comes to a feller — wal, yew kin be harder to ketch'n an eel in wet grass, yew kin! 'N' I'm proud on ye fer it, too! Now let's go git some seashells fer Aunt Sally, to show her she wa'n't fergot."

As planned, also, Uncle Asa and his piquant "Girlie," after a day of quite unalloyed happiness and mutual heart exchange, drifted homeward on the inflowing tide just as the moon began to silver their pathway. A gentle sea breeze swelled the one triangular sail Uncle Asa had set, the marsh birds had all gone to rest, and the peace and quietude of coming night were over all. He, also, having "said his say," as he would put it, and steering, was in retrospective mood, watching the scattered lights in the distant village and conscious, also, that a now distinctly outlined and more populous one on the hillside back of it, would in the near future become his final home; while Hazel in the bow, ensconced in cushions, picked soft chords on her banjo and watched the rising moon.

To one, life's end and its ominous shadow were nearing; to the other, its charm, and all its illusions were just rising.

Only for a little while was this wide separation of mood allowed by Hazel, for intuitively reading it in her father's face, she swept her fingers across the banjo sharply, and began to carol that happy old darky love song, "My Gum Tree Canoe," as if meaning to drive away his megrims.

"We've had a jolly, happy day, hain't we, girlie?" he said tenderly, later on, as they walked hand-in-hand up the lane. "One o' the happiest I've had in many years — jist you 'n' I, 'n' it war enuff. Two is company, 'n' even three is a crowd when two are satisfied."

"We are going to have a lot more of them, father," she answered in the same tone, "and you must put it out of your head right now that I am likely to marry and leave you, for I never shall." And then the bony fingers that held one of her soft little hands closed with a warmer clasp.

Another surprise, and also an assurance of what was in store for her — the weal or woe of a man's heart — awaited her on the parlor table in the form of a mailed package addressed to her by what she instantly recognized as the same hand that had addressed the bundle of books and music, and opening it eagerly, she found a beautiful pair of bead-embroidered and fringed deerskin slippers, and on the front of each was painted a tiny spray of flow-

ers with a bird holding it in its beak. With these, also, was a fan with tortoise shell handle, that opening disclosed an excellent picture of a rocky coast, vista of ocean, and waves leaping over the rocks, quite suggestive of a breeze. The one marvel of the gift — she knew it came from Stacy — was that the slippers fitted her dainty feet exactly!

And recalling how he had stood and watched her with toes pointing upward under the big pine tree, a flush came to her face at thought of his accurate memory and measure.

"It won't do him any good," she said to herself decisively, feeling in the slippers to find if he had enclosed a card, and failing; "they are two beautiful gifts, but I shall never leave father."

Then she hurried up to her room and hid them, also resolving to keep the arrival of these a secret.

CHAPTER XX

STACY'S trip to Seattle, including other stops, had consumed more time than he expected, and it was almost six weeks ere he alighted from an east-bound train at Rawhide Junction once more. He had wondered many times how Uncle Asa had come out of his bargain-driving with Otero, hoping most decidedly that it had been successful. Hazel had been in his thoughts scores of times each day of those long six weeks, and once during a tiresome wait at a hotel he had written her a long letter, detailing his visit to Rawhide and discoveries there, then from a peculiar intuition that such a missive was or might be premature, had torn it up.

"She distrusts me, and will until this business is all cleared up," he said to himself rather ruefully now, "and any attempt to disabuse her mind before that time won't help matters. If it all comes out as I hope," he added after a long recalling of his few meetings with the cool and piquant Hazel, "she will see me in a different light. Until then, I'd best keep still."

And now at this Junction, with an hour to wait

and nobody to help him do so, also watching the vanishing train, he very much wished himself still on it and speeding eastward towards Oakdale; then sat down on a bench outside the station and drew from his pocket an almost week-old New York paper bought of the train boy the evening previous.

As he glanced over it, the name "Curtis & Company" in big type caught his eyes. Also, and above that, the caption in larger letters —

"THE PASSAIC RECLAIMING AND DEVELOPMENT COMPANY.
7% GOLD BEARING BONDS."

In an instant Stacy had read and grasped the entire animus of this advertisement; Curtis & Company, Mills Building, Wall Street, were offering for sale the perfectly safe and most remunerative bonds ever known! That the dear public who had money to invest should most certainly make haste and send theirs in before these were all sold! There was the usual lengthy explanation of how in case these gilt-edged securities were over-subscribed for, allotments would be made pro rata and in accordance with date received; would-be investors were also advised to wire their subscriptions in, with check to follow by mail, in order to be more certain of obtaining a few of these rare and valuable bonds. The name

of a prominent bank was given as the one where interest, semi-annually, would be paid, and a long list of names for reference followed. All in all, it was the usual flamboyant advertisement so often seen in New York papers, also those from other financial centers.

When Stacy had grasped this one with all it meant to him, he gave a loud and prolonged whistle!

"Well, you old swindler," he next exclaimed, jumping up, "now I have you right where I want you, scooped and bottled up! And I've got the cork!"

Then, so excited was he that he started down the long platform to walk off some of his boiling excitement.

"Well, if this isn't luck!" he added, now halting to cut out this announcement. "I am, as Uncle Asa would say, a goat without horns!"

And just then a vision came to this inveterate builder of air castles, and he saw himself with Jim Harkins and another officer, also perhaps this Swede, Tygson, just walking into the office of Curtis & Company, and quietly but firmly requesting him or Otero to sign a deed of Bear Hole Swamp for "one dollar and other considerations" without further parley.

"And he will do it, too, without a murmur,"

asserted Stacy, glancing up to see the Rawhide branch train backing down beside the station; "do it as nonchalantly as though buying a drink, for that's his make-up, a dead game sport! I think the proposition to visit Rawhide and face the music would phase him, however." Then Stacy picked up his suit-case, boarded the branch train, and was soon crawling up to Rawhide.

He had wired Harkins, who met him at that terminus, and the two shook hands eagerly.

"Well, what luck, friend Harkins?" Stacy inquired anxiously. "Got any facts or documents that we want?"

"Oh, yes, all we shall need," returned Harkins buoyantly. "I've got Tygson's affidavit detailing the story of that night's orgie and his part in it, and he is more than anxious to go East and face Curtis North. He also wants some plan devised to make North give back his stolen gold or its value. He had about twenty thousand dollars worth of dust in his belt that night, he claims, and the murdered man double that. I've had hard work to keep him quiet, and not demand a warrant and officer sent to arrest North at once! I've also another proof positive, a picture of North found by someone in the cabin a month after the murder. It had been tucked in back of

the lithograph of a race-horse tacked to the bare wall, and probably left there by one of the women. I got this through our friend McCue, who knew who had taken it then. I've also got 'Bricktop' located, or think I have. She's in 'Frisco, or was a year ago."

"Well, you have got a full hand and the joker," laughed Stacy, as they now alighted from the carriage taken to the hotel. "Let's have something to eat! I'm faint from fasting. Then after I've breakfasted, we'll settle on our plans. I've also got a surprise for you — read that!" and Stacy handed him the clipped-out advertisement.

It was a half-hour before Stacy emerged from the dining-room, for this high-altitude town's bracing air had made him ravenous. Then he lit a cigar, found Harkins outside on the piazza, also smoking, and sat down beside him. "Well, Jim," he said in off-hand tone, "what do we do, go fetch North back here and have a lynching party, or just make him disgorge?"

"Well, it's up to you," returned Harkins, "and as I said, you can have either one or t'other, but not both, as you can easily understand. Why the man's a mark now, and by that ad. I judge he may have money enough to pay smart. I think," he added after a pause, "we'd best take Tygson

along and get his money for him. Also, and in return for that, make him sign some sort of paper certifying that this was a loan made to North by him, or payment for mine stock and now returned. You see, I am, as an officer of the law, placed in a peculiar position, and under oath not to compound a felony or accept bribes, of course. I didn't even dare tell Tygson I knew where North was, only that I knew someone who did or thought he did. For me to go to New York as an officer and demand money of North under threat of arrest and not make it, might, if found out, land me in jail. You can ask for a deed of your swamp for a nominal payment legally, Tygson can demand his stolen money back, I can be standing by as an observer, but I can't do any demanding or admit I have a warrant for the arrest of this swindler. You must do the talking, I stand by as a bluff, and that is the layout.

"I will, of course, go with you, and do all I can for a brother Mason," he continued after another pause, "and as a private citizen, or I will go as an officer with a warrant for this man's arrest. It's a choice, and for you to decide which I shall do."

"I must think that over a little," returned Stacy slowly, not quite grasping the legal aspect of the

case. "I don't care to lay myself open to the law, or, as you say, compound a felony."

"You won't and can't unless I swear I've proved to you this North is an escaped criminal," interrupted Harkins, "and I shall not do that. My idea is that you best go on East alone, look things over, write me later, and if you say so, Tygson and I will come on and meet you in New York. You may want to investigate this new scheme of Curtis & Company, and perhaps use that for a lever to make him disgorge."

"I presume a write-up of Curtis North, his picture and a certificate of Rawhide stock ready for use by a New York paper, would make him wince," mused Stacy in response to this. "Anyhow, I'll do as you say, Brother Harkins — go back and look the land over. There is no hurry, and I don't know yet whether my Uncle Asa has sold his swamp or not. If not, there is nothing doing for us until he has, that's certain. I think you'd best let me take that picture of 'his whiskers' on with me," added Stacy after a pause, "also the buffalo head fob. I can use Uncle Asa's certificate of Rawhide stock for the signature of Curtis North, obtain that of Pentecost Curtis from the hotel in Barre, then make a photo of picture, fob, and the two signatures on one plate. A sort of deadly

parallel proof of the alias business. I will also write up the Rawhide history, parallel that with this new Passaic swindle, and say — wouldn't the "New York Universe" just jump at such an exposé? That paper has a perfect mania for the exposure of such swindling schemes, a world's record, in fact!"

And once more Stacy began the building of an air castle, and saw this one of an exposure, not only filling an entire page of "The Universe," but copied by hundreds of other leading papers as well!

"Your scheme is all right," laughed Harkins in response, "and if Curtis & Company have invested as much money in this swindle as the ad. shows that they must, you can easily exchange your write-up and proof for a deed of your Uncle Asa's swamp and no questions asked."

"And poor Tygson get left?" interrupted Stacy.

"No-o," drawled Harkins, also castle building, "he and I could come on later, or better still, be at hand, and as soon as you got your deed signed, witnessed, and in your pocket, I could do my duty as an officer — and there would be something doing in Rawhide later on, and Curtis North would be the star feature! I can subpœna 'Bricktop' as witness for the State, Tygson will swear to any-

thing, and by Jove," he added, slapping his knees sharply, "we've got him, got him dead to rights!

"It does me good," he almost shouted, "to see my way clear to string that villain up, for it was a heartless murder, to inveigle and dope a poor miner, then kill and rob him!"

And so in accord in the cause of justice were these two now, that they jumped up and shook hands there and then.

"We'll do it, we'll do it," exclaimed Stacy. "I'll start East to-night, you go to 'Frisco and locate 'Bricktop,' then come on when I wire with Tygson, and the trick is done!"

"Better still," asserted Harkins, wise to the ways of such elusive females as this "Bricktop," "I'll fetch the red-headed fairy back to Rawhide and lock her up till wanted. Then we've got her safe. By Jove, we've got him, got him sure! I can almost see him swinging in a bag now! And how tickled Tygson will be, for this poor Johnson was like a brother to him, he says."

Stacy and Harkins now made another tour of Rawhide, visited its Masonic temple, library, club rooms, and called on the unique McCue, who so enjoyed lynchings. Then that afternoon Stacy departed for the long ride eastward, well satisfied

with what he had accomplished, and with his thoughts on Maple Dell and the fair maid dwelling there.

"If only Uncle Asa has landed Otero I'll have a deed of Bear Hole Swamp made out in her name," he said to himself, castle building once more, when the seclusion of his stateroom on the night sleeper was reached, "and give it to her for a Christmas present. Wonder how the slippers fitted, and how the dear little girl is anyhow? She is a cooler, she is, but I'll win some smiles if any man can! I do hope Uncle Asa has landed Otero all right long ago, for that will put him on my side for keeps! Then I'll go ahead and build our dam, induce one or two capitalists to put up shops and use our power to make any old things that are useful, start a real estate boom in sleepy old Oakdale, shove up a few new houses, dredge that harbor, build a wharf, run a trolley line between that and the depot, and things will be doing in old Oakdale for certain!

"And why not use Bear Hole Swamp for our reservoir," he added, now thinking of it for the first time, "and have storage room enough to turn a million spindles? Also save Rocky Glen for a trout preserve, and let Uncle Asa run it? Then we can dike our power down the east side of the

valley, build shops below it, and save the town for residences! By Jove, I'll do it!"

All of which goes to show that Stacy was not only fast falling in love with Hazel Webster, but capable of counting a thousand chickens before they were hatched.

CHAPTER XXI

IT was almost two months from the day Stacy left Albion, west-bound, until he, more than glad to do so, alighted from an early morning train — home again! He sent his suit-case to his domicile by an expressman, breakfasted at the best hotel, and reached his office, as he expected, an hour ahead of his partner. All the clerks and the faithful Ike was there, and Stacy at once invited the latter into their private office for consultation.

"Well, Ike, my boy," he then queried eagerly, "any news from Oakdale?"

"Why, yes, very important news," responded Ike with a knowing smile and wink. "You've been euchred by Pentecost Curtis and Miss Carmen's admirer, the Spaniard, who have bought Bear Hole Swamp ahead of you!"

"Hurrah for our side, Rah! Rah!" exclaimed Stacy, slapping Ike on the back. "This seems too good to be true! How did you find it out?"

"Why one of the Barre Committee, fellow by the name of Alton, J. Smith Alton, his card says,

came in and told us about it. Said he thought we ought to know it. He was here over a month ago, sporting around with Miss Carmen. I saw them twice, once going into the Jap Garden, and once out to Riverside theater," and Ike smiled wisely again. "The little dude was out of town, I guess," he added, "but he's back now. I saw him on the street last week."

"That's all right, more than right," returned Stacy, chuckling, "and now, Ike, I'll post you on what's doing. Mr. Leon Otero, having bought Bear Hole Swamp of Uncle Asa, as I planned to have him do, notified the Barre chap to come here and tell us, then finding I was out of town, went to New York to confer with and assist his backer in a new scheme they are at work upon. He has also notified the Barre Committee where he is to be found when wanted, and is awaiting my return anxiously, to work the great twist act on us. Miss Carmen is also waiting for the other bracelet and her share of the spoils. And they will both wait a long time, and some more at that! Now, Ike" — and Stacy paused to formulate his next move on this peculiar chessboard —"I want you to get some chum of yours, fellow, of course, and you two go around together each evening where this Otero is likely to go, and when you spot him, get near

enough for him to hear, then begin telling your friend of a good joke you heard lately of the Town Committee of Barre or someone buying a swamp named Bear Hole in Oakdale for a dam site, when another one had already been bought by Bemis, Colby & Company for that same purpose. Enlarge upon and laugh over the huge joke on the party who bought Bear Hole Swamp, then go away; or, better still, after some other exchange, separate in opposite directions. Do you understand?"

"Sure," returned the now city-wise Ike, "that's an easy stunt, and I'll go at it at once. I might expedite matters by locating the hotel this Otero stops at — I know him, but he don't know me — and the trick can be turned right away." Then the dutiful Ike returned to his work in the outer office, and Stacy awaited Colby with much eagerness. He arrived shortly after, and the two partners greeted each other cordially.

"Well, old man," asserted Colby after the hand-shake, "I'm mighty glad to see you back safe and sound. When did you fetch in?"

"This morning on the sleeper. How's everything, and Aunt Carrie? Seen her lately?"

"She's o. k., and so is everything else, and you've done finely to land that extra order for drills,"

responded Colby, who had the habit of condensing a good deal in a few words. "But the Barre folks are getting uneasy, your friend Otero has bought the dam site they suppose we want, which squares your Uncle Reuben, as you wanted, so you best go there in a day or two and pacify them. Get rested first, however. I've got a couple of surveyors engaged," he added hurriedly. "They can go with two days' notice, and you know what's to be done."

"They can wait till I want them," returned Stacy decisively, "but I'm going to Oakdale on the noon train, however; lands me there in time for supper."

"With the fair maid of shortcake fame, of course," smiled Colby, facing around from his desk again. "You are stung, as I remarked, and I'm in for the five-hundred-plunk present, I see, and glad of it! By the way, how's your sleuth act panning out? Got Curtis North in limbo yet?"

"No, but as I've got my Uncle Reuben, as you call him, out of it, I'll have North on a limb later. Tell you all about it when I'm back. Give me a check for three hundred; I'm broke," and the hustling Stacy, waiting only for that, added, "Ta, ta, see you in a week," and hurried out of the office.

Like his partner, he was not addicted to long explanations or waste of time over business mat-

ters. With him it was to think and act almost simultaneously, as he was now doing.

He cashed his check within five minutes after the bank opened, bought four fresh outing shirts, some ties and collars, rushed around to a candy store for a five-pound box, halted at a barber's for a shave and hair cut, then jumped into a cab and arrived home at ten-fifteen exactly, and ordered "Cabby" to call for him in time for the twelve-forty-five train out. He also rushed into the house, kissed his aunt dutifully, said, "I'd like dinner at twelve, sharp," hurried upstairs, took a bath, repacked his suit-case, and was down stairs at eleven-twenty precisely, looking spick and span in a fresh summer suit.

"Now, Aunty," he said, plumping into a big chair near her, "I've got just an hour to tell you all about it, then I'm 'off again, Finnegan.'"

"Why, what's your rush, Stacy?" she returned pleadingly. "You have been gone two months, and now you stay home just an hour! It — it isn't treating me right!"

"No, no, it isn't, Aunty," he assented, soothingly. "It's an outrage, I admit. But I've got pressing business in Oakdale, and that milkmaid who says 'Haow' is waiting for me — I hope. I shall be home again in a few days, and give you a five

hours' talk. Here's something I brought you," and opening the package she found a table-spread of soft deerskin, with an astounding picture of Indians seated around a campfire, and a pair of beaded moccasins. Of course she exclaimed over them, grateful to be remembered, as all old ladies are.

"I hope you will have good luck in Oakdale, Stacy," she assured him benignly, when he was departing again, "and remember, when you do bring a good wife here, it will be the happiest day I've known for a long time."

"Even if she does chew gum, and say 'Laws-a-massy!'" laughed Stacy, then kissed his aunt, gratefully this time, and was whirled away.

It was just sunset when he once more crossed the Rocky Glen Brook, nearing Oakdale, also eight weeks and two days since Uncle Asa had bade him God-speed at the station. And now, glancing at this brook (his own, as he recalled with satisfaction), its diminished volume struck him as ominous, for the long hot summer had reduced it to a mere rill. Hazel's schoolhouse, a poor little brown hut — seemingly so now — was next passed, and brought a thrill to his heart; the village street, soon entered, was without an occupant, and looking across the opening vista of meadow to the thicket of trees marking the entrance to Maple Dell, Stacy felt that

somehow these past eight weeks had linked his heartstrings and life plans almost irrevocably with or to the "maiden rare" abiding there. How she fared, or possibly felt towards him, was like the twilight now concealing the enclosing hills, and as vague as they. But a faint glow above these from the rising moon was increasing, and to Stacy just now, that seemed an omen of favor; also made him wish he could fly to that sequestered spot.

Sam and the Old Guard were now, as invariably on summer evenings, lined up on the piazza as he alighted from Uncle Levi's old carryall, and Sam, seeing who it was, sprang to his feet with a "Hullo, Mister Whipple, by gosh, I'm glad to see ye," grasped Stacy's suit-case and almost dragged him inside. "Come right along," he added, in his anxiety to make his guest welcome, "'n' I'll hev suthin cooked special ez it's past supper time. What 'ud ye like? I kin gin you some steak, some fried lobsters, or I kin brile ye a spring chicken, only that takes longer."

And this reception warmed Stacy's heart as naught else had for two months now, and assured him that he was in favor at Oakdale, or at least at Sam's hostelry.

"Go right up to the front room, yew know yewr's," Sam added, and as Stacy had admitted

fried lobster would suit him, he then vanished kitchenward to order it.

The presiding genius of the dining-room who answered to "Norah" also smiled on Stacy later on, and then, when well fed and back to the piazza, he felt that he must break away from the talkative Sam as speedily as possible, for Maple Dell was calling him.

"I hope ye're goin' to make a good stop with us, Mr. Whipple," ventured Sam as Stacy came out, evidently anxious to keep him there for the evening. "Sit down 'n' tell us what's kept ye 'way so long? I cal'lated yew'd be back fishin' in your own brook long 'go? 'Scuse me fer seemin' 'quisitive," he added eagerly, "but we've ben hearin' so many yarns 'bout ye or what ye war goin' to do here, I — wal, I — I'm powerful glad to see ye anyhow! I s'pose ye know thar's ben 'nother feller here to buy B'ar Hole Swamp, didn't ye?"

And then Stacy had to laugh at Sam's adroit way of relieving his suspense without being impertinent.

"Yes, I have," admitted Stacy, still smiling and resolving to have some fun with Sam in turn and square an old score. "I know this chap, Otero, has bought Bear Hole Swamp for a big reservoir and is to put up a power house and some shops below as well. Have heard, also, he has bought or is to buy

your hotel site and build a big modern one for summer visitors, that the harbor is to be enlarged, a line of steamers put on to New York, and lots more doing. Have you had an offer for your hotel?"

"Good Lord," gasped Sam, "do ye mean it or am I dreamin'?" Then with a quizzical glance at Stacy he added, "Yew kin take my hat on yarnin', yew kin! I ain't seven-spot high in the game, not a minute! But thar's suthin' brewin', 'n' — wal, I'll 'low ye'r square with me fer B'ar Hole Swamp, all right, all right!"

"I evened that up when you signed the deed for Rocky Glen gorge for six hundred dollars, Sam," laughed Stacy, "for it is there I may build a dam and put up a power house, and I would have paid three thousand dollars or even more for it if obliged to. I am willing to allow we are quits on Bear Hole Swamp, Sam. You needn't feel bad, however. Later on I will show you how to square yourself in money for practically giving me the Rocky Glen site."

And then Sam Gates, the sharpest and shrewdest Yankee in Oakdale, realized that he had met his match and been outwitted.

"I shall have a couple of surveyors here in a few days, Sam," continued Stacy, now resolving to relieve that worthy's suspense, "and we will probably

begin building a dam right away, for my firm has a contract to supply electric power to Barre within a specified time. I shall make my home here in your excellent hotel, so will some of my best men; we shall also have a gang of laborers to house and feed at low cost. I can pay you well for your assistance in providing for all these men, if you will give it. Now you know what I came here for two months ago. Also why I had to look over Bear Hole swamp and furnish you an excellent joke."

"But what 'bout the other feller, 'n' his buyin' B'ar Hole," gasped Sam, "fer he did 'n' paid 'n ungodly price fer't, too?"

"Did you send him into it ahead of the game?" queried Stacy, beginning to laugh.

"O' course, o' course," chuckled Sam; "I had to do that, he war sich a stuck-up little store-winder figger he needed goin' through that swamp to take the conceit out o' him. 'N' it did," he added, now shaking with laughter, "fer Uncle Asa had to fetch him back; 'n' all B'ar Hole'd left on him war jist a few muddy rags 'n' one eye to see outen. He looked wuss'n a weasel drownded in mud, he did, 'n' so mad he wanted to lick me!"

"And bought the swamp after that?" queried Stacy, now joining in the laughter. "He probably saw its value as a hoax and wanted it for his

friends. Swamps like that are scarce in this world, Sam! But don't feel grieved. It's still there, and you can still send newcomers into it."

Then glancing at the rising moon, he continued, "Now I'm going to stroll down and call on Uncle Asa," and so escaped from Sam and the Old Guard, now agog over this astounding disclosure.

"It's Hazel he's anxious to see," asserted Sam after Stacy was well away from the piazza, "'n' by gosh, if she ketches him she's a winner!"

"Yew'd orter told him 'bout Martha's lightin' out," drawled Lazy Luke, "'n' prepared him fur the shift."

"Why didn't yew do it?" demanded Sam.

"How could I?" retorted Luke in measured tone. "Yew 'n' him war a clackin' every minit, 'n' nobody else could git a word in!"

And far away on the lonely, houseless, moonlit road, Stacy was striding onward, oblivious to all the excitement his arrival was to stir in Oakdale, for just ahead was a bewitchingly cool maid who held the key of his future life.

CHAPTER XXII

FOR almost two months Stacy had thought about and lived over his few meetings with Hazel many times; also recalled her dainty form, rose-tinted complexion, and soulful eyes almost daily during that time. "A fool illusion," he kept reiterating to himself. "She's a wonderfully bright and charming country lass, smooth of speech as a polished city girl, and keen as a razor at repartee. But she distrusts me, didn't take to me overwell at first, and it's either forget her or I'm in for a heartache, I guess."

But he couldn't do that, and in spite of the deep-laid and sinister plots and schemes he was now trying to circumvent in the cause of justice, or else evade himself, Hazel kept intruding her personality. He had also, as she shrewdly surmised, set about the rescuing of Uncle Asa's foolish investment for the double purpose and kindly wish to aid both him and Hazel, with her gratitude as final outcome. This had been done, as he now knew; Uncle Asa had probably played his rôle successfully and obtained a good price for his swamp; Hazel knew it, also, and

Stacy's part in that direct restitution, and she ought by this time to feel that he was an honest well-wisher of her father and herself, and receive him accordingly.

But would she?

And now reaching the foot of the maple-shaded lane and sequestered dell, he halted, realizing that his unannounced call so late in the evening was in rather poor taste.

"She may be abed," he thought, "and will think I'm crazy to call now."

But it would do no harm to reconnoiter the old house; she might be on the porch with Uncle Asa or — better still — alone, and so he continued up the lane. Half way to the house and out upon the evening air now came to him the mingling of several voices singing to sharper piano accompaniment, and hastening onward Stacy heard the last verse and chorus of "The Quilting Party" trilled and borne to him adown the dell's perfect quietude. He felt sure that there was no need of hesitating now; no one would be looking out, so he hastened on and from outside the shrub-enclosed dooryard soon saw Hazel at the piano, a group of young folk around her, and facing the window through which Stacy now glared, was the citified fellow he had seen with her in a hammock two months previous!

And just then Stacy felt — well, it is needless to assert how!

Another song was immediately forthcoming from this happy group of smiling faces, Hazel's exquisite voice leading in it, and as if to add an extra thorn, that particular song was one of the recent popular ones Stacy had sent her!

Only for a minute or two did or would Stacy remain an observer of this scene; he could be no part of it, he felt it rude thus to play eaves-dropper, and turning, hurried back to the lane again, feeling woefully left.

And then whom should he see just emerging from the meadow across the street but Uncle Asa!

A few quick strides, a "Hello, Uncle Asa," from him, a "Wal, hullo! By the great horn spoon, Mister Whipple!" in louder-keyed response, and Stacy saw him drop a bundle and basket, leap forward, and grasp both his hands in cordial eagerness.

"Wal, wal, wal," continued Uncle Asa, holding Stacy's hands, "ef this ain't a s'prise! Why didn't ye write me? Good Lordy, but I'm glad to see ye! 'N' so'll Hazel be! Come right up to the house! When'd ye git here?"

"To-night," returned Stacy with more calmness, "and came down as soon as I could get away from Sam. How are you and how is Miss Hazel?"

"Oh, fine's a fiddle, both on us! Come right up to the house 'n' see the gal fer yerself." And Uncle Asa picked up basket and bundle and grasped Stacy's arm. "I've a lot to tell ye," he added eagerly, "'bout how I skun that snake in the grass you sent me, 'n' took his hay! Nine thousand five hundred fer that mire hole! Think on't! 'N' it's in the bank, too, 'n' I've ben singin' hallelulah three times a day ever since!" And so overjoyed was Uncle Asa that he slapped Stacy on the back.

"I've got suthin else to tell ye," he added more seriously. "Martha's gone!"

"What — dead?" queried Stacy, astonished.

"No, jist gone," returned Uncle Asa in droll tone. "The Lord hain't took her to His bosom yet 'n' — wal, it's a question in my mind as to jist what her address will be in the next world, anyhow. But come right 'long 'n' see Hazel."

"No-o, I'd better not to-night," responded Stacy, halting. "Your daughter has company, a lot of young people — I walked up near enough to see — and I'd rather not disturb them."

"That's nothin'," declared Uncle Asa assuringly, "only Jennie Oaks 'n' Molly Bascom 'n' some o' the young folks come down fer a sing, I cal'late. I went down the crick to pull my pots 'n' didn't know it. They'll go away perty soon. Why, I've ben

waitin' two months to see ye — I won't let ye go now," and he grasped Stacy's arm again to pull him.

"We will go up and sit outside a little while then," answered Stacy, yielding, "and to-morrow I will call and pay my respects to Miss Hazel." And back up the lane he went with Uncle Asa.

Somehow, too, just now, as Stacy came in sight of the quaint old rookery of a house once more, half hid by the two luxuriant clusters of lilac and trellised porch between, its outstretching light and Uncle Asa's warm welcome all made it seem like a home-coming to him. That Hazel had these callers to enjoy a sing now appeared differently, and really no reflection on him or his unexpected arrival. Instead, he now felt it to be an evidence of her popularity among Oakdale's young folk. More than that, had he only known how little respect she actually had for this cigarette-smoking young fop from Barre whose ideas and repartee were limited to "Yaas," "Now, really," "You surprise me," and whose most thoughtful utterances seemed vapid to Hazel, Stacy would have felt less chagrin at seeing him watching her so admiringly!

But Stacy didn't, which was, or was likely to be, a decided advantage to Dan Cupid.

"We'll sit out here under the big maple tree back o' the grin'stun," remarked Uncle Asa, now leading

the way to it, "so's to be in the shadder, 'n' they can't see us, or they'll stop singin'.

"'N' it sounds good to me, jist fer 'nuff 'way, 'n' moonlight," he added, as they both stretched themselves on the greensward, "'speshly Hazel's. I've heerd the parson run on perty consid'ble 'bout angels singin', but when she jist lets herself out — wal, I'm thar in a minnit, 'n' don't want no harps twangin' in, either."

And just then, as if to prove his assertion, Hazel's voice rose sweet, clear, and like a flute in that old-time ballad, "Beautiful Bells."

Stacy had expected, was anxious, in fact, now to hear Uncle Asa's version of what had occurred, but neither uttered a word until this song was finished; or then either, for next came another old-timer, "Speed Away," and following that what Stacy afterwards learned was Hazel's favorite, "The Last Rose of Summer." Then the chat and laughter inside began again. Stacy saw Hazel go out to the dining-room and return with a tray of what he assumed were refreshments, and then Uncle Asa spoke again.

"I s'pose first of all, Mr. Whipple," he said soberly, "ye're wonderin' how 'n' why Martha lit out 'n'— wal, I'd rather not tell *jist* the reason, 'cause she's gone, 'n' most likely never'll set foot in this

town agin. She's gone to her sister's in Goshen, that's 'bout thirty mile from here, 'n' I cal'late neither on us is sheddin' tears, mebbe. Martha's ways wa'n't my ways, she sorter — so it seemed — figgered all me 'n' the farm 'n' Hazel was fer was to gin her a chance to salt down money. I gin her 'bout all that come in 'cept my lobster money 'n' now 'n' then a load of hay to run the house on; Hazel paid board, 'n' 'bout all we got was salt mack'rel fer breakfast, 'n' o' course could make dinner 'n' supper on water mainly, ez she cal'lated. Then she was pizen to Hazel!

"And then"— with a long pause —"the night arter I got hold o' that big roll o' money — Martha found it out o' course —'n'—'n' suthin happened that I'd never quite believed 'thout Hazel seen it ez she did. 'N' next day Martha went away, 'n' that's all I'll ever say 'bout it. The money's in the bank now, I'm goin' to have the farm 'prized 'n' pay Martha her dower right, 'n'— all I kin say is a man kin be fergiven fer makin' a drivilin' idjit 'n' biled-down dern fool of himself once — if he does it twice he'd orter be kicked into next year!

"I've got Aunt Sally Perkins, Molly Bascom's aunt, to keep house fer us; she's good ez gold 'n' all wool, rastles with the Lord night 'n' mornin', 'n' thinks the only thing Hazel lacks is wings.

Likewise the only thing I'm real shy on is failin' to say grace 'fore every meal. 'N' she kin cook ekal to Hazel's mother, 'n' that's — some."

"But tell me about your bargain with my friend, Otero," rejoined Stacy smiling, for he saw or knew that Martha had tried to steal this money as surely as though Uncle Asa had said so; "did it work out about as I said?"

"Why, 'twas like takin' candy 'way from children," laughed Uncle Asa, "'n' Sam helped. He sent this little snippet, silk shirt, blue tie, tall collar, 'n' dude hat on, into B'ar Hole ez a starter, 'n' he fetched out arter ten hours o' black flies, Mohawk briars, mud 'n' hornets, so done up he jist lay down 'n' bellered like a calf. 'N' all he had left on him wuz the seat o' Sam's pants! He wuz so bushed, too, he was only able to cuss in a whisper! I took him back, 'n' Sam said he wuz so mad when he got his breath he wanted to kill somebody!

"Next day he showed up lookin' slick agin, 'n' then, Lord, how I did sass him! Rubbed it into him 'bout snakes not bein' willin' to bite him till — wal, if he'd had a knife I think he'd 'a' stuck it inter me!

"'N' then I took nine thousand, five hundred outen him jist like pullin' plums off'n a tree, 'n' sorry I didn't make it ten! I could, too, for I had him so

harrowed up he'd 'a' gin it without a squeal." And Uncle Asa shook with laughter at his recollections.

"You did it all fer me, Mr. Whipple," he continued, sobering, "saved my life 'most, 'n' Kingdom Come fer Hazel. I feel you'd orter hev half that money, too, 'n' if thar's anything I kin do fer you long's I live, it's yourn', no matter what."

"You are more than welcome to the advice I gave, which was all I did do," returned Stacy seriously, "and the only return I'd like is for Hazel to become convinced that I acted from unselfish motives and to avenge your having been robbed by a plain, every-day thief as you were. Only you mustn't tell her so," he added after a pause, "or even hint it. As I said to you on the shore that day, that conviction must force itself upon her, or she will dislike me ever after. No young lady of her spirit can be told that she has been mistaken in a man, and not resent it."

And just then these two from partial ambush behind the grindstone saw the little band of Hazel's callers bid her good-night and troop away down the lane.

"Now we'll go in," said Uncle Asa, rising speedily, "so Hazel kin see ye. I know she'll be glad, too."

"No, decidedly no," returned Stacy. "I posi-

tively would not so intrude! She has been entertaining her friends, must be tired, and so please give her my compliments and say I shall take the liberty of calling to-morrow evening. If you are going down to pull your pots to-morrow afternoon I'd like to go with you. I've a long story of more interest to you than you can guess. I also want your advice."

"I'll go, you bet," was the speedy assurance, "'n' we'll start top o' the tide 'bout two."

"I'll be at your boathouse at two," replied Stacy, also rising, and handing Uncle Asa the box of candy he had brought, "Please give this to Miss Hazel from me and assure her that I enjoyed her singing very much." Then he hurried away.

To his surprise, also, he found Sam alone on the piazza awaiting him when he reached the hotel, for that astute Yankee had by this time seen a new horizon opening above Oakdale, the possibilities of which made him almost gasp.

"I've ben waitin' up to see ye, Mr. Whipple," he assured Stacy, now rising to meet him. "Hev a cigar, 'n' let's talk matters over." And Stacy, feeling sure that the one proferred must be Sam's best, lit it, dropped into one of his big chairs, glanced over the vista of broad meadows to where the moon

silvered the bordering ocean, and awaited what might come.

"Now fust of all," began Sam, also lighting a cigar, "I want to tell ye I hope ye don't lay up anything agin me on account o' the trick I played, sendin' ye into that swamp? It's a habit o' mine, sich jokes, 'n' 'bout all I've got to 'liven up life here. 'N' I'm goin' to 'low I'd 'a' done jist what ye did, buy that Rocky Glen gorge ez ye did, 'n' I take off my hat to your slickness. Yew're all right, yew be! Now, ez the sayin' is, whar are we at on this new deal, 'n' what kin I do to help ye?"

"And my worthy friend Sam Gates at the same time," laughed Stacy, who understood the race of men who live "beside the highway of life."

"Wal, o' course, in a way," drawled Sam, "only ez ye got yer dam site a damn sight less'n 'twas wuth to ye, ye might — wal, jist gin me a hint 'bout buyin' up some land yew don't really need, 'n' may riz? I don't s'pose yew want all the persimmons on the bush?"

And then Stacy laughed heartily at this Yankeeism!

"No, Sam," he returned, still chuckling, "you can have all I can't use conveniently, and I'll put you wise if you will do one thing for me?"

"I'll do it, sure's a gun," responded Sam unsuspectingly. "What is it?"

"You promise, do you, Sam, on your honor?"

"I do, sartin."

"Well, then, if to-morrow you will rig up for fishing, go down through Bear Hole Swamp, and give what trout you catch to Hazel Webster, I will in one month from to-day tell you where to buy land that is sure to quadruple in price in a year! Now I have your promise, Sam!"

"Kinder gittin' square with int'rest, ain't ye?" responded Sam, grinning, "but, b'gosh, I'll do it! Yew're goin' to build below Rocky Glen, so o' course land up thar'll riz, won't it?"

"I didn't say so, Sam," replied Stacy, laughing again. "I said I might. I bought that to catch trout in!"

"'N' ye've ketched me comin' 'n' goin'," admitted Sam, grinning ruefully, "but if ye'll promise to keep whist 'n' not tell the old hulkers here, I'll do ez I said to-morrow."

"And I'll keep my promise, Sam!"

Then Stacy, satisfied with the way he had squared himself with the irrepressible Sam, went to bed.

CHAPTER XXIII

"YOU needn't keep your promise to fish Bear Hole Brook, Sam," Stacy assured him next morning. "I was only jollying you. Besides, trout are not good so late in the season." For over night Stacy had thought better of himself, and to send that old and fat landlord through this morass seemed a pointless and cruel joke.

"I'll tell you about our plans in due time," he added. "In fact, when it comes to buying land as a speculation I think we had better go into partnership. You know the value now better than I do, who owns it, can drive better bargains, and if you want to go in with me on some, I'll furnish the capital and allow you one-third of the profit."

"I'll do it, yew bet," admitted the shrewd Sam, "'n' mighty glad o' the chance!"

And so the first practical step towards the erection of Stacy's city was taken and the firm of Whipple, Gates and Company thus started.

"I shall want Uncle Asa in with us," added

Stacy. "He owns a lot of land that will — if my plans work out — become valuable, and — well, I think a good deal of Uncle Asa."

"I'm willin', more'n willin'," asserted Sam, "fer he's all right, honest, 'n' a perty shrewd old duck arter all; we three kin make a team."

And they did, and one that in after years practically controlled the little city that grew up where sleepy Oakdale now stood.

After breakfast, Stacy started out on a tour of inspection, first to Rocky Glen Brook. And now its small volume in contrast to the Bear Hole stream at this season again occurred to him. A reservoir was possible here in the gorge, but in comparison with the mighty power and capacity of one in the Bear Hole Swamp valley, a mere pigmy!

His next move was to climb the hill west of that and survey its area. And now looking over that and recalling stage-driver Uncle Levi's past assertion that "Natur had riz hills all 'round on purpose fer a dam," Stacy realized its force.

"Here is the place for our reservoir," he declared, after a long look around, then down the valley to the bordering ocean, "and alongside the valley with a canal above is where factories must be put up and save Oakdale for residences. This is and must be the inevitable outcome and plan of my city, for

reservoir space, volume of water, and location all force it.

"By Jove, they do without question!" he added, after another long look around. "And there is timber enough in that swamp to build a thousand houses!"

And just now the deed of this unquestionable site whose value might soar into tens of thousands of dollars was in the name of Leon Otero, backed by the most unprincipled sharper in New York City!

"I've got to get possession of that grant; it's a case of woodchuck now!" Stacy again asserted, recalling this fact. "Got to twist Curtis North, or my city collapses!

"I'm afraid I've made the mistake of my life," he continued, starting down through the undergrowth toward the village again, "by putting up the scheme to save Uncle Asa and a paltry four thousand dollars. If ever Curtis North realizes or guesses my plans, fifty, no, a hundred thousand dollars won't buy it back unless it's to save his neck!"

And just then Jim Harkins, Rawhide, and the Passaic Reclaiming Company flashed into Stacy's mind.

He dined once more, served by the gum-chewing Norah, and this time two of that omnipresent genus "ye drummer" were also being entertained.

"Is it an omen, or advance guard of commerce?" thought Stacy, sizing them up by sidewise glances. Then, hurrying through his meal, he started down towards Maple Dell and to Uncle Asa's boathouse. To his surprise and gratification, also, on nearing it he saw Hazel seated beside it and Uncle Asa in his boat, both apparently awaiting him. She arose speedily as he came down the narrow walk, smiled, extended her hand, and a "How do you do, Mr. Whipple, I am very glad to see you again," was his greeting.

And just then Stacy's heart gave an unusual throb of satisfaction also.

"I am not going to intrude on you and father this afternoon," she added, after Stacy's expression of pleasure in again meeting her. "Only I wanted to thank you as soon as possible for the beautiful gifts you have remembered me with, and invite you to tea. I can't promise strawberry shortcake again, however."

"Your smiles and yourself are enough," he returned gallantly. "I assure you that I have been counting the days till I could see you again."

"I think you were very unkind not to come in last evening," she responded archly. "Were you bashful?"

"Yes, that was the reason," smiling once more, "and then I didn't want to intrude."

"Well, don't let it happen again," glancing at Uncle Asa, patiently awaiting his passenger, "and come back early. Our tea will be ready at six-thirty."

And this was Stacy's reception by the elusive Hazel after so long an interim, and a more cordial one than he had hoped for, though not one he might presume upon, however, as he knew full well.

And then, with the tide at half ebb and running strong, they made good time down the winding creek, and in less than an hour were tossing upon the ocean billows while Uncle Asa pulled his pots. He only drew a dozen of the nearest ones, secured perhaps twenty lobsters of legal size, then rowed back inside the small harbor, pitched his catch into a floating car, and pulled up to the old wharf.

"We'll jist set down fer an hour or so," he then said, leading the way up to the little grove, "'n' hev a smoke talk, 'n' go back so not to keep the wimmin waitin'."

And Stacy, reading this genial Uncle Asa aright, knew that to bring Hazel and himself together as much and as often as possible was now his sole thought and plan.

And Stacy was quite willing!

"Well, Uncle Asa," he began, after the two were seated with cigar and cob pipe alight — Uncle Asa had refused Stacy's proffered cigar —"I promised you a story of interest and you shall have it now. To begin, your friend, Curtis North, alias Pentecost Curtis, is an escaped murderer, and now in New York engineering another swindle much like the one he duped you with, and the sheriff of Rawhide is ready and anxious to take him back and swing him up!"

"Good Lord!" gasped Uncle Asa, scarce grasping all this. "How'd ye find all that out, 'n' is this little Otero, mixed in?"

"Very much so," Stacy returned assuringly, "in fact, equally guilty in law, and as likely to swing for it." And then he began at the beginning of this astounding discovery and told the story of his visit to Rawhide, what he had learned there, and what his plans and expectations were in full.

"I may want to take you to New York," he concluded, "to identify and help scare this Curtis North, also Otero, into signing a deed of Bear Hole Swamp that I want, and then if all works well, Harkins, another officer or two, and this Tygson will walk in upon Curtis & Company and take them back

to Rawhide! What will then happen to them I'll leave you to guess!"

"Oh, Lordy, Lordy, this seems too good to turn out so," exclaimed Uncle Asa with a shout, "'n'," with an admiring look at Stacy, "yew sartinly are a wizard o' the fust water to ketch them two devils, ef ye do!"

"Well, I mean to," asserted Stacy modestly, "and soon, too, within a month. I just ran up here to look things over, call on you and Hazel, stay a day or two, then I'm off to finish matters if I can. I've got to prepare a write-up of both the Rawhide swindle and this new one of 'his whiskers,' make photographic copies of his picture, the watch fob, his signature as Curtis North on your mine certificate, and as Pentecost Curtis on the Barre Hotel register, also one of these Passaic bonds, these of course to be duplicated. And when I have this gun loaded, I shall wire Hawkins to bring Tygson to New York, then come here for a day's visit and take you on to help and see the fun. I've a faint idea that when Curtis North sees us four and glances at my write-up, he may wilt, 'jist a trifle,' as you would put it! Eh, Uncle Asa?"

"Yew bet he will," shouted Uncle Asa, exploding in laughter, "'n' by hokey, I'll ask him if he won't

lead us in prayer arter the deed is signed, same's he did here at the meetin's!" And that keen humorist, quick to see the funny side of everything, laughed until tears almost came.

"'N' ef he ain't feelin' in jist the mood for prayin'," he added, chuckling, "I'll ask him ef he won't jist sing one verse o' 'The Sweet Bye 'n' Bye' to kinder prepare his mind fer Rawhide 'n' the ceremonies thar, I will, by cricky!"

"We must be slow and careful in this matter," cautioned the more serious Stacy. "You mustn't hint what I've told you, not even to Hazel as yet, for it might get back to Barre through her friends. One of the Committee knows this Otero, and not until I've got this Bear Hole deeded back and Curtis North taken must a soul in Oakdale know what's afoot. Is Squire Phinney one who can keep a secret if he is paid to do so?"

"He is, sartinly," returned Uncle Asa assuringly, "ef thar's a dollar in it, yew bet, fer the Squire likes 'em better'n any man in Oakdale 'n' he's got more, too! He's the richest man here."

"Well, I can fix him then," complacently, "for I must obtain a copy of the Bear Hole deed when I come back after you.

"And now, Uncle Asa," he continued after a pause, "I have another matter to discuss with

you. If all my plans work out right, how would you like to go into partnership with Sam Gates and myself in a land speculation here? I have made up my mind that Bear Hole Swamp is, after all, the best site for a reservoir. Once a dam is up and such a magnificent power ready at hand and known abroad, capital will rush to Oakdale; this harbor deepened, land for factories will be in sharp demand, and we three can manipulate matters as we see fit.

"I have, or can obtain capital enough to buy half of Oakdale at present valuation; all you need put in is your experience and good horse sense."

"I'll do anything ye want o' me, 'n' dern glad to," Uncle Asa assured him with a twinkle in his eye, "but ez fer my hoss sense — wal, figgerin' on the showin' I've made the last few years, ye must think I need a keeper? I've seen days arter broodin' over that mine stock 'n' smartin' from Martha's sassin', when the only thing I felt like doin' war, go to some deep hole in the crick, say 'Here goes nothin',' 'n' jump in! I guess I'd 'a' done it, too, ef 'twan't fer. Hazel."

"But you landed that wily Otero," responded Stacy assuringly, "and I have faith in you. No stupid could have bluffed him as you did." Then he began a further elaboration of his plans for city

building, where streets must be laid out and intersect, a canal constructed along the hillside, where factories should be put up to use this power, and how in due time a small fleet of coasters would be anchored in this secure harbor not ten rods from where they now sat!

Then Uncle Asa, who had listened attentively to this astounding revelation, spoke up. "Mr. Whipple," he said, "ef yew hain't got the greatest think-out thinker in yewr attic I ever heerd on, I'm a goat! Why, ye're jist startin' with a dam up back o' my house 'n' grindin' out a whole city full o' people! Talk about the feller in one o' Hazel's books who rubbed the lamp 'n' got anything he wanted — wal, he ain't in it a minnit with yew, he ain't. All yew got to do is to rub yer head, 'n' a hull city sprouts up!"

"I don't wish and won't allow your quaint old house or Maple Dell to be disturbed," asserted Stacy, smiling at Uncle Asa's compliment, and castle building again. "It is too picturesque and secluded a nook for that. I'd like to build a miniature cascade leaping into a small pond in the brook in front of the house to keep trout in, however, with rustic seats and swans to add charm. I think I shall make a trout preserve of the Rocky Glen gorge, also, and as Hazel's old schoolhouse will be out of date then,

I'll set it up in a grove overlooking that for a kind of summer house."

"Ye're figgerin' on livin' here, too, I cal'late," interrupted Uncle Asa anxiously. "I hope so, anyway." Then he sighed as the magnitude and conception of all these changes and obliteration of old landmarks forced itself upon him. "I wish you would come 'n' live here," he continued, "fer you'll sartinly be the hull thing then?"

"Well, that depends," returned Stacy musingly, and after a long pause. "I have no fixed plans for myself in the future, but — if a certain cool and sagacious little lady I know became interested in me and my new city, I might decide to make it my home."

Then Uncle Asa smiled contentedly.

"I cal'late she will ef she's o' the same mind ez her old dad," he said.

"Curis, curis, how things come about," he added reflectively, "'n' now, Mr. Whipple, I'm goin' to tell ye suthin mebbe ye don't understand. When ye fust showed up outen that swamp, razood some but still gimpy, I took to ye on sight. I did more the next day 'n' the next, seein' how kinder philosophic you took the way them gals desarted ye on the beach. But Hazel didn't. She s'pected from the start ye war 'nother Curtis North here to skin me."

"I knew it; have known it all along," interrupted Stacy smiling, "but I didn't mind that. What a man is, will become known sooner or later whether he wills it or not. No man can conceal himself for long."

"'N' ye noticed, too," continued Uncle Asa, unheeding this and smiling, "how Hazel come down to the boathouse jist to meet ye? I didn't ask her to, jist said you 'n' I war goin' down the crick this afternoon, 'n'— wal, that gal kep' an' eye on me every minnit arter that, 'n' when I started she war at my heels like a cat! You kin bet she's figgered yew out all right by now, ef she is my gal."

Then Stacy, glancing out over and far up the lone and lonely shore upon which a long line of inrolling billows was beating in solemn monotone, smiled contentedly at this consoling assurance. He had never doubted but that it would come in due time; now it had come, and the way was open for a fair and manly assault upon the citadel of Hazel's heart!

"I think we'd best be starting back," he said, consulting his watch after a long five minutes of this pleasant retrospection, during which Uncle Asa watched him curiously. "We mustn't keep Miss Hazel's tea waiting."

"I think so, too," assented Uncle Asa, rising speedily, "'n' we'll start right now."

CHAPTER XXIV

SEVERAL times during his two months' trip westward with its frequent recollections of Hazel, Stacy had made mental contrast of the two meals partaken of at her home — the first a charming tête-á-tête one with her as combined serving maid and hostess, the second a ceremonious affair made uncomfortable by Martha's absurd and clumsy flatteries — so that now on returning with Uncle Asa to be on time for a third one, he felt both curious and uncertain as to how it would pass off. Also what manner of person this new housekeeper would prove to be.

"Things are a trifle mixed at the house now," Uncle Asa had assured him on leaving the boathouse, "'n' Aunt Sally, that I told ye 'bout, ain't quite sartin yit jist what is 'spected of her. Hazel is the boss, ez I want her to be, but Aunt Sally has notions 'n' perty sot in 'em; so ye see it takes time for them two to git 'malgamated, so to speak. Yew won't mind it, though, fer both on 'em'll feel you're important company."

To be so considered was not to Stacy's liking,

however, just now. He much preferred to be accepted as one of the family, with Hazel as hostess. He had no occasion to fear annoyance, though, as the sequel proved, or aught to make his anticipated meal and evening anything but charming.

To begin with, the maples that embowered Uncle Asa's ancient and picturesque abode were a golden, glowing mass of foliage in the sunset light as Stacy walked up the lane, with here and there a cluster of scarlet leaves to accentuate the yellow. The arbor-vitæ hedge enclosing the dooryard was of vivid green, the flower beds within were flashes of bright color, and each added a softening, chastening effect to the old brown dwelling, half hid by the two monster lilac shrubs.

"Yew go right into the front door," Uncle Asa directed as the yard's gate was reached, "'n' I'll go 'round to the kitchen." And so doing, the crowning touch of color was added in Hazel herself, who — evidently on watch and clad in a rose-hued gown — opened that door to meet and greet the arriving guest.

"I am glad to see you so punctual," she said, smiling her welcome with a gracious bow. "Walk in, and we will await tea in the parlor. Allow me to take your hat."

And just then Stacy felt sure that his face and

hands needed soap and water, and that his hair must be awry.

"It has seemed quite a long time since you were here," she added, after his greeting, and both were seated. "How long is it?"

"Just two months and eight days," he returned after a moment's thought. "I was last here on June twenty-sixth."

"And summer has almost passed since then, and I'm so sorry for I dislike the melancholy days, and Nature's demise with dread of winter just ahead."

"So do I," he responded briskly, "only we in the whirl of city life don't notice it as much. To me, an autumn day's outing in the country is a rare treat, and always eagerly anticipated."

"Of course because it's a change," with a slight sigh, "but if you were forced to watch the falling leaves day after day alone, you would feel otherwise. But"— smiling again —"tell me, please, why you were so — so ungracious last evening when, as I assume, you came down to call on me and didn't?"

"Bashfulness pure and simple, especially simple," he admitted, also smiling, "and fear that I should spoil the good time you were having. I obtained the best of it, however, for let me assure you your singing, heard from outside, was charming."

"I shall excuse you on the score of bashfulness, then," flushing at this obvious compliment, "and trust you may overcome it in the future." And just then a tall, angular, and severe-faced lady, slightly gray, entered the parlor, bowed graciously to Stacy, and said, "Our tea is ready, Miss Hazel," with nod to her.

"This is Miss Perkins, our Aunt Sally, Mr. Whipple," said Hazel, rising and thus introducing them, before leading the way into the dining-room. Halting at the seat designated for him by Hazel, Stacy now noticed that a new and more modern dining-table and chairs had replaced the old ones, also that there was a pretty and daintily decorated dinner set, and a rug in place of the old, faded rag carpet, while this Aunt Sally's very ceremonious and deferential, if austere, manner was in pleasing contrast to the red-headed personage who had flattered him so nauseatingly. Uncle Asa came in the next moment, so changed in garb that Stacy scarcely knew him. He wore a well-fitting business suit of gray, a turndown collar and pretty four-in-hand tie instead of the high one and stock of a former occasion, and looked ten years younger by the change. "It's Hazel's doings," thought Stacy, and then the meal began.

And now Hazel, conscious no doubt (as Stacy

imagined) that their household change would make him feel ill at ease, and yet was one he could not question, showed her charming tact at once.

"I have been so anxious to hear about your western trip, Mr. Whipple," she began with the pouring of the tea, "that I can hardly wait for its telling. I am interested in that wonderful country, especially its grand mountains and beautiful scenery, as you may recall, and now won't you please tell us all about it?

"Everything," she added, smiling encouragement, "no matter what! Indians, if you met any; cowboys shooting up a town, a train holdup, if one happened to you — all will be welcome and new to us."

And thus encouraged and inspired — as well as might be by this charming hostess — Stacy, a fluent talker, began at once and between times for an hour, while the tea biscuit, cold chicken, quince sauce, and other delicacies were passed, that trio heard a concise yet well-told tale of all he had seen or heard during that two months' journey. He even touched upon Rawhide and its marvelous growth and, to add humor, described McCue and quoted his laughable comments upon lynchings, shootings, and the fun the "b'ys had in the ould toimes, begorra!"

All reference to Curtis North was omitted for

obvious reasons, however, and when the meal, or its last item — delicious home-grown peaches and pears — was disposed of, Hazel arose, led the way back to the parlor, lit the lamps, and for the first time since that one charming hour on the porch two months previous, Stacy was alone with her.

And just now, in the soft glow of these shaded lights and garbed as she was in rose-tinted raiment, her cheeks akin to one of the peaches he had just devoured, "eyes dancing, lips entrancing"— well, suffice it to say that it now dawned on Stacy Whipple (erstwhile cynical bachelor) that nowhere in the wide world had he ever met or was likely to meet again, so beautiful and charming a maid! More than that, so enamored was he by this time, that only his cool good sense and command of himself prevented a rash and quite premature assertion of that fact.

"Do you know, Miss Webster," he said instead, and after they were seated again, "that I have recalled your Maple Dell, yourself, and this quaint old home of yours countless times since I've been away? Also, and even oftener, the first time I saw you under the pine tree and that ghost music I heard before I knew its source? You may think it's funny, but every time I do so recall that first vision

of you, I begin humming or whistling, 'Don't you hear dem bells a-ringing?'."

"It is funny," she answered, "also proof conclusive that you are amenable to the fear of ghosts. You thought it was spook music you heard that day in the woods, so the scare has kept you humming it ever since."

"I'm willing to allow that," he admitted, smiling at her telltale flush, "also that spooks do now and then materialize into charming maidens who play the auto-harp and frighten easily."

"And run away from mud-covered ogres," she interrupted, "for you were a sight to behold that day and"— laughing now —"all that kept me from fainting was the faith that I could run faster than you and so escape."

"I guess you can in more than one sense," with an admiring glance, "but I shall not allow it if I can help it, you may be sure." Then desiring to tease her he added, "By the way, who was the exquisite I saw enjoying a cigarette in the hammock with you that day two months ago? He certainly wasn't an Oakdale product."

"Oh, that's Arthur Penrose from Barre"— indifferently —"a cousin of Molly Bascom's. I met him there two or three winters ago, I think."

"And visiting her again, I assume?" Stacy inquired, watching Hazel's face. "I thought I saw them both here last evening?"

"They were here," she answered with cool audacity, "and he is one of my ardent admirers, quite devoted; in fact, here almost every evening, and" — smiling saucily —"I wouldn't be surprised if he called to-night."

And then Stacy realized that his teasing plan had met with failure.

"I hope not," he rejoined bluntly; "I don't want the second evening I've had with you spoiled that way, for I should imagine he'd want to murder me if he so admires you."

"You wouldn't mind, would you"— with a light laugh —"you are used to meeting bloodthirsty men, aren't you?"

And as if to pay him back for his attempt at teasing, she added, "if he calls, you can retreat to the bulwark of the grindstone again, perhaps, and so feel safe."

"Possibly," answered Stacy, also laughing, "if I am struck with instant idiocy — not otherwise." Then and with a dare-all impulse he continued, "No fellow who can't win a girl with two years to try in, can scare me away!"

And then this one recalled her father's assertion

that Stacy "wa'n't a mite skeered o' a little gal like her," with tingling nerves and sense of admiration.

And it must be asserted, if he had been timid, or shown it in this skirmish of words, he would have lost ground with her. Like all petite women of keen intellect, the one man most likely to win her was a big one of dauntless courage. She might tease him, exasperate him, defy him, doubtless would; but if he won her (as Stacy now meant to win her) he must now and then (metaphorically speaking) grasp her and shake her as a big terrier would a small rodent.

"I hope you don't really think it was bashfulness that led me to hide behind the grindstone last night," Stacy continued after a pause, "for I assure you it was not; only a fear that my calling might seem an intrusion by you, especially as I hadn't been invited."

"I certainly do," she responded in the same bantering tone, "and now that you deny it so vehemently I am positive you couldn't have been forced to come in at the point of a pistol! But I must excuse you. Mr. Penrose is a dangerous man."

"Very," ventured Stacy with a tinge of sarcasm, "especially if he stormed a powder mill with his favorite weapon, a lighted cigarette. Not otherwise."

" You don't admire cigarettes, I assume "— ironically —" don't you smoke them? "

Then Stacy smiled at this cool, audacious maid in calm serenity, quite sure he read her aright. Also her indifference to Arthur Penrose.

" Oh, yes, I admire them if on the windward side," he returned suavely, " or at long range. I can't say that I do if they happen to be in a hammock with a certain saucy young lady I have the honor of knowing, however — in the vernacular, that is different."

And just then as if fortunately to end what might have become a personal discussion, Uncle Asa came in with a basket of white birch wood and kindlings.

" I think I best start a leetle fire," he said, going about it. " It sorter takes the chill off, 'n' is more cheerful.

" A fire is a sorter inspirer o' pleasant thoughts," he continued, addressing no one in particular and lighting a scrap of birch bark, " a kind o' sociable friend you kin talk to if lonesum. I used to go campin' down on the shore," he added, now seating himself and turning to Stacy, " jist fer the comfort o' watchin' a fire o' driftwood 'n' hearin' the waves a-boomin'. Somehow, thar 'n' then a fire is the most consolin' thing on arth, 'n' more so than in the woods. It's pleasant thar, o' course, but on the shore its light 'n' cracklin' is like a human speerit

tryin' to be heard. 'N' then the waves! It's s'prisin' jist then, 'n' dark all round, only the fire goin', how many kinds o' voices you kin hear in the waves. You kin hear children laughin' 'n' cryin', wimmen, too, 'n' men yellin' 'n' howlin'! You kin hear bulls bellowin', wild cats howlin', pigs squealin', hens cacklin'; all sorts o' voices, 'n' sometimes wimmen sobbin' like their hearts wuz breakin'.

"I know a nice spot to camp in, Mr. Whipple," he suggested after a pause, "a sorter pocket to the right o' whar our table stands. I've got two tents, 'n' what do ye say while yew're here to us takin' Hazel 'n' Aunt Sally 'long 'n' campin' jist one night ez a sorter lark? Hazel kin take her banjo 'long, 'n' the moon's jist right? What do ye say, Hazel? Will ye go?"

"Why, yes, of course," she smiled. "I'll go anywhere you say, father, and do anything you wish. And such a trip would be very jolly. Only" — pausing — "maybe we had better take Jennie Oaks and Molly instead of Aunt Sally. I think they'd enjoy it better. And Bertha Phinney, too," she added, smiling saucily at Stacy; "she took quite a liking to you, Mr. Whipple, and would be pleased to meet you again."

"And I shall feel honored by any lady friend of yours wishing to meet me," returned Stacy in the

same bantering tone, "and I shall not only be glad to go and be useful, but say all the sweet things I can think of to Miss Phinney."

"Wal, yew two sartinly don't need no more coaxin'," asserted Uncle Asa, "'n' let's say we go day arter to-morrer. I want one day to go down 'n' set up the tents."

"And I'll go and help you," put in Stacy; then smiling at Hazel, added, "all the music I've heard for two long months, Miss Webster, was surreptitiously obtained last evening. Now, will you favor me personally?"

And favor him she did for one delightful hour and with a repertoire of songs ranging from old-time ballads to the modern classic ones that astonished him! He had sent her a hit-or-miss collection of arrangements for both banjo and auto-harp, with a few popular ballads; only one of which she now rendered, and it is needless to say that he now felt conscious of his own lack of musical knowledge, thus proved.

But he was wise enough to make no mention thereof or ask why she apparently found them of no value.

But Hazel made amends, as was her nature, and soon after she ended her charming concert.

"You mustn't think I do not appreciate your

lavish gift of so much music, Mr. Whipple," she then explained, " for I do, and it was very kind and thoughtful of you to send it. Only I have had scarcely time since it came to more than look it over and select one gem."

And Stacy, knowing what had happened to this household, felt relieved.

" I'll be on hand any time you say to-morrow, Uncle Asa," Stacy declared when rising to depart, " and as the evenings are just right for a campfire and moon also, we must have a jolly time."

" I think so, too," added Hazel, with cordial smile, " and to-morrow Aunt Sally and I will cook all sorts of good things to take with us."

And when Stacy walked down the lane after profuse thanks for the evening he had so enjoyed, Uncle Asa seemed to him what he was, one of Nature's noblemen, brimming with love for all that was good and true in humanity, and Hazel the rarest, most tactful, charming, piquant and sweet girl ever created for man's care and protection.

And the one instant's tingle of her little hand in his proffered one at departure, lasted him all the way back to the hotel.

" In love? " you ask again. That needs no assertion.

CHAPTER XXV

A LETTER from Colby awaiting Stacy at the hotel that night on his return from Uncle Asa's quite put the charming Hazel out of his mind, however, for the time being, and set him to thinking.

Briefly stated, it was to the effect that he had better make haste to decide upon the site most desirable for their dam, and to wire for the two engineers to come on and survey it. Another letter enclosed with this from Davis, chairman of the Barre Committee, also informed him of what he already knew, namely, that a party named Otero had bought what he (Davis) supposed was the best location for a dam, etc., etc.

"It might be advisable for you to visit Barre before returning," Colby had added, "and pacify this Committee. While we have now twenty-two months in which to complete contract, we shall need to get busy."

And Curtis North, alias P. Curtis, was yet to be reckoned with!

For an hour now after reading these urgent letters, Stacy sat in his room smoking fiercely, while planning how best and how soon he could solve this problem, obtain possession of Bear Hole Swamp, start Curtis North and pal towards Rawhide and well-merited punishment, begin the building of the dam, and take the first steps towards his intended city.

"I am almost sorry I promised to join Uncle Asa's camping-out plan," he said to himself now, "but can't back out and don't want to either. What an idyllic and romantic old fellow he is, after all, to go camping on the beach just to watch a fire and hear wave voices. If Hazel has inherited it, she will be doubly charming."

When breakfast was over, Stacy presented himself to Squire Phinney to make the first move in this complex plan.

"I am," he then said to that worthy after introducing himself, "planning to buy back the Bear Hole Swamp property recently sold by Uncle Asa Webster to one Leon Otero, and in the name of his daughter Hazel. I want you to fill out a warranty deed of it in Otero's name to her by to-night, for which I will pay you. In return, also, and if you will promise me absolute secrecy in the matter, I will, later on, give you information that will enable

you to buy some land and double your money on it in the near future."

And then Squire Phinney, keen to Oakdale's affairs, a shrewd Yankee ever on watch to make a dollar and keeping most of all he got, took off his spectacles, wiped them, put them on again, and stared at Stacy while his eyes twinkled.

"We heered 'bout ye, Mr. Whipple, heered a hull lot, 'n' I'm glad to see ye," he said. "'N' I'm glad ye'er going to git Uncle Asa's land back, too. He got 'n' ungodly price fer't, though, ez I s'pose ye know, but I didn't like the little weasel he sold it to. I'll fill ye out the deed to-day, 'n' keep mum ez ye wish, 'n' twon't cost ye but fifty cents fer it." Then he adjusted his spectacles again, leaned back in his chair, and surveyed Stacy once more with smiling admiration.

"Be you," he queried the next moment, while his mouth twitched, "be you goin' tew — tew give Hazel this land, Mr. Whipple? 'Scuse me fer askin', but o' course if it's deeded to her, it's hern. Mebbe you're cal'latin' to marry her, though!"

And then Stacy exploded in a burst of laughter at this Yankeeism.

"If I ever ask and obtain her consent to that important step I'll tell you right away, Squire," he

"MEBBE YOU'RE CAL'LATIN' TO MARRY HER, THOUGH!"
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said, and laughing again he bade this Yankee good morning and left his office.

"I'll bet two to one you don't keep your promise about the deed," he asserted to himself after leaving the Squire's office, "yes, ten to one, for a Yankee with such curiosity positively couldn't do so! 'Cal'latin' to marry Hazel, mebbe!' Well, I am if I can," and then, as the humor of it returned, Stacy laughed again.

And he was right in his surmises, for not an hour had elapsed after Stacy had bade the Squire good morning ere that inquisitive Yankee, first exacting a solemn promise from his wife not to tell, told her, she in turn did the same by their only daughter, Bertha, and later that day when Hazel came to invite her to the camping-out party, she also was informed in an awed whisper that a deed of Bear Hole Swamp would be presented her in the near future.

"Maybe he intends it for a wedding present," added Bertha, smiling with admiration, "for his sending you the two presents he has must mean something," whereupon the aforesaid Hazel blushed crimson, for she had never admitted receiving these gifts to anyone — not even to her father.

How the arrival of them was known by Bertha

can easily be guessed from the fact that her intimate friend, Molly Bascom, sorted all arriving mail in Bascom's store and post office combined, and Uncle Levi, who brought the express package of books and music, was never known to keep a secret longer than was required to find someone to tell it to, hurrying at that!

But forewarned was forearmed with Hazel! She now knew (as every daughter of Mother Eve does know long beforehand) that this bold fellow was fast falling in love with her; and that, in due time, he would propose marriage.

"It will be 'no'" she said to herself very decidedly on her way home from Bertha's. "No, positively no! I will not leave poor dear old dad with only Aunt Sally to care for him, never! never! But what does he mean by this deed? To buy me, is it?" And then the high-spirited Hazel tossed her head in a way that boded ill for Stacy.

And at that very moment the said arch-plotter (according to Hazel) was steering Uncle Asa's big dory down the creek, with him at the oars, and in it were two tents and poles, two filled bed-ticks, and one empty one, and blankets, sheets, and pillows — all taken from his home. Also minor needs for camping, enough to fill the boat.

"We've got a lot to do, my boy," asserted Uncle

Asa, thus addressing Stacy for the first time, as he pulled up to the little old wharf, " 'n' none too much time," then leaped out, as nimble as a boy, made the boat fast, and began unloading. Stacy, of course, assisted with eagerness, and in less than an hour the tents were set up within a sheltering sedge-topped nook between the sand dunes, sea grass cut and spread for carpet in them, old sails laid over that, beds and blankets put inside, and then Uncle Asa began to shovel sand over the base edge of the tents.

" We've got to make them gals comf'table, you know," he said, pausing to pat the sand down with his shovel and smiling at Stacy, " 'speshly Hazel. Yew think I'm boyish, mebbe, 'n' I s'pose I am," he added in half apology, " but I thought a heap o' that gal's mother; she's grown up to look 'n' be 'zactly like her, perfect picter, in fact, every time I look at her, 'n' "— sighing —" takin' her 'round 'n' doin' fer her sorter makes me feel like I was courtin' agin. She begun taggin' me soon ez she could toddle, I've carried her pig-a-back more miles'n she's weeks old, 'n' we've kept taggin' each other ever sence, 'n' now ye kin see why I felt the way I did 'bout that money. I jist hain't got nothin' nor nobody to live fer 'cept Hazel."

" So I have observed," returned Stacy, touched

by the curious pathos of this admission, "and your daughter is well worth all the love you lavish on her. I don't think you boyish, only an unusually affectionate father."

"It's curis 'bout our feelin's, ain't it?" Uncle Asa continued without response to Stacy's assertion, "'n' how they're the injine that keeps us goin' 'n' doin'. I worked 'n' scrimped, perfectly willin', to save that money fer Hazel, 'n' enjoyed doin' it. I keep plottin' 'n' plannin' some fun fer her, this camp-out trip was jist fer that, 'n' thar ye be.

"I've biled life down," he added after another pause, "into 'bout this: in order to be happy, you've got to hev three things: suthin to do, suthin to love, 'n' suthin to hope fer. I've got a good deal o' the fust two, but the last — wal, it's gittin' thinner day arter day." Then, and as if this were enough of moralizing, he began shoveling and patting the sand again.

When the tents were all snug and secure he began the building of an open fireplace in front, next, he made an improvised table from the unhinged door of his fish house, then gathered and piled handily an ample supply of driftwood.

"We got to dig some clams 'n' bile some lobsters ready to fry," he next proclaimed, glancing at the now bare flats. "Likewise steam a mess o' clams

fer dinner," and again he led the way to accomplish these needs.

It was ten-thirty when they arrived at this seldom-visited beach, and two o'clock before the camp was made ready, and frugal dinner of steamed clams, coffee, and bread and butter also ready. And then these two men, boys in spirit, now sat down to enjoy their meal and a needed rest. After this was disposed of, Uncle Asa lit his pipe, Stacy a cigar, and the former, as was characteristic of him, began a philosophic disquisition on human impulses and conclusions that may well be quoted.

"I hev notions 'n' idees 'bout people, Stacy — I s'pose I might ez well call ye so," he began with, "that I like to talk 'bout 'n' see ef we agree. Now, fer instance, we folks here hev ploughed 'n' planted all our lives 'n' never thought beyond that, 'n' long yew come, look 'round a little, 'n' discover what not one o' us ever s'posed possible. I cal'late, too, yewr city will be here — in time — fer I kin see what a no-cost power is runnin' to waste in them two streams. Only we folks didn't see it ez we might if our foresight had been ekal to our hindsight. We're livin' way long fifty years back, I cal'late, too," he added after a pause, "'n' some on us is still votin' fer Andrew Jackson. But yew've woke us up, or will, I guess."

"Perhaps that's true," smiled Stacy, "and the wonder to me is that this possibility hadn't been discovered by someone else long ago; it was so self-evident! I probably shouldn't have done so, however, if it hadn't been for the needs of Barre and call from them to furnish power."

"Wal, ye ain't inclined to brag much," asserted Uncle Asa, "'n' I like ye all the better fer't. Braggin' makes a man 'pear more like a fool than tryin' to lift himself by his boot straps, 'n' counts 'bout ez much. Then agin, most men swar they're wuth 'bout ten times what they be, 'n' I allus think if I could buy 'em fer what they're wuth 'n' sell 'em fer what they say, I'd make a stiddy business on't. I s'pose it's all right, though, 'n' a man kin crow himself into notice ef he's willin' to wear a fool's cap ever arter.

"Then agin, thar's goin' to meetin'," he continued after a pause to relight his pipe. "It's all right, 'n' I go 'bout once a month, but it's mostly to hear Hazel singin', howsomever. 'N' when she does I shut my eyes 'n' I'm sartin it's her mother up thar in the choir. Ez fer the preachin'— wal, if 'twan't fer the hope o' heaven 'n' fear o' hell in us all, our parson'ud be out o' a job middlin' soon. We need preachin', though, only I think it orter be on how to live to-day 'n' help others do right, 'stead

o' makin' us oneasy 'bout the futer. I think if we do 'bout ez we'd done by 'n' make folks more cheerful, our souls'll take keer o' themselves, I do! Ez fer prayin', wal, it's healthy, moral exercise for those who b'lieve so, but the meanest man I ever knew said grace over the swill 'fore he fed his pigs, folks said, so since then I hain't taken much stock in't. We need to b'lieve in God, though, with so much cussedness goin' on all 'round, fer if we wa'n't sartin He ruled the world, we'd be more sartin the devil did.

"Keerin' for wimmen ez they'd orter be," he added, "has a good deal to do towards makin' us men folks better, I often think, 'n' we kin brag all we please 'bout bein' in the image o' God 'n' all that sort, but it's my notion 'twas woman's hand that pulled man up out o' his original cave 'n' made him a gentleman. Ez fer gittin' a harp, 'n' playin' that, 'n' smilin' fer all etarnity — wal, I'd rather hev a fightin' chance to make up with the woman I keer fer, than do that! Then, too, I'd choose Brimstun Corner with her ruther'n Harpland without her, I would, yew bet! My idee is, it's best to

"Live, love, laugh, be happy, 'n' pass it along,
There'll come a day when you'll drap out o' the game."

"I agree with you most emphatically," responded Stacy, thinking of Hazel, "and the love of and care

for a good, affectionate wife is the most uplifting and purifying impulse that comes to us men. I used to be a scoffer on that point and think otherwise, but I am fast changing."

Who and what had brought this about may easily be inferred.

"I'm sartin ye be," declared Uncle Asa, smiling his satisfaction, "fer I've ben watchin' ye 'n' studyin' ye out, I'll 'low now. I took to ye at fust, but trustin' ye — wal, that has to come later, anyhow, ez mine has. Thar's only one thing more I'd like to see come," he added after a long pause and keen glance at Stacy, "'n' that is yew'd somehow — ef yewr city is built ez ye cal'late — yew'd make it yer home. I said that to ye yisterday, 'n' I say it agin, more meanin'ly. Then ye want to rec'lect this: ye'd be more to hum 'n' a bigger toad in a puddle ye dug yerself than in one somebody else dug, 'n' don't fergit that!"

"I won't," responded Stacy, smiling at his homely aphorism, "and as I admitted to you here two months ago, my future plans will probably be shaped by those of someone else — who, I'll leave you to guess."

And so ended this heart-to-heart exchange.

A few more steps towards the perfecting of his camping-out plan were next attended to by Uncle

Asa. The lobsters he had boiled were packed in a box of ice and placed in the fish house with a basket of clams, an opening between the sand dunes back of the tents filled with scrub pines to protect them from wind, and a carpet of sedge grass spread in front. Then, as the sun was now well down, they started homeward on the inflowing tide.

"I'll go up to the house to say 'How do you do' to Miss Hazel," Stacy admitted when the foot of the lane was reached. "Also, I want you to let me have that mine certificate of yours to photograph the signature of Curtis North from. I must go to Barre after our camping-out frolic, then on to New York to load my gun for this swindler; and when everything is ready I shall want you to come to Albion and go back there with me to see the fun."

"'N' I want to, 'n' to see a lot o' squirmin' on the part o' that villain to even up the worryin' I've had," rejoined Uncle Asa, quick to grasp Stacy's plans. "'N' I'd like to rub it into that little runt some more 'bout B'ar Hole Swamp 'n' the snakes," he added chuckling. "I kin 'most see a hull circus jist ahead fer me."

"Ye must stay to supper," he declared when the house was reached, "'n' spend the evenin', too. I told Hazel we'd be back in time."

"No, thank you, I'd better not," asserted Stacy in

positive tone. "I expect important letters at the hotel, and will wait outside till you bring me the certificate."

But Hazel, probably on the watch, soon appeared, and a "Why, Mr. Whipple, you must come in and have supper!" from her came near changing Stacy's sensible intention not to overdo his welcome. To his credit, however, he declined even her cordial invitation with profuse thanks (and lost nothing by it), and when departing, carried away a hastily gathered bouquet of flowers presented by her.

To him, just now they seemed suggestive of his easy and enjoyable pathway to her heart. He had forgotten his suspicion that Squire Phinney would betray him, however, and did not realize that that fatal deed of Bear Hole Swamp would in due time torture him even more than its original had done.

CHAPTER XXVI

WITH a warm, bright September day, the sun softened by an ambient haze, the wind a mild zephyr, the sea blue, sparkling and fringed with prattling wave-wash; also four bright, vivacious, and pretty girls, not to mention Uncle Asa with his droll optimism, and Stacy the sole gallant upon that day's outing — well, if he failed to appreciate his good fortune and enjoy it all, it was his own fault.

He did not enjoy it, though, as the sequel proved, or rather it ended in a fit of sulks for him.

Miss Jennie Oaks, almost as keen at repartee as Hazel, together with the latter, kept his wits working overtime, however, as the saying goes; Mollie Bascom, plump and jolly, with Bertha Phinney, also rotund and amiable, were one and all conspiring factors to a rare day of simple country seashore enjoyment.

They romped on the beach, the girls, having suits, went in bathing — Stacy, having none, got left in this; they dug clams later when the tide served; the dinner was a feast of sea food cooked by Uncle

Asa, with many delicacies added from their home by Hazel; seashells were gathered and wild flowers to deck tents and table, and when the sun, red as a ball of fire, was sinking behind the hill tops, and the evening meal of fried lobster and salad of the same prepared by Hazel all ready, the girls, at least, voted the day so far a great and glorious success.

Uncle Asa's fire of driftwood, started with the twilight, came next, the moon rose in red splendor out of the now motionless ocean, and when blankets were spread between tents and fire, the party seated upon them, and Hazel began to tune her banjo — the only other sounds, except modulated voices were the crackle of the burning fire and the low murmur of the near-by ocean.

"This is soothin', comfortin', 'n' consolin' all in one," ejaculated Uncle Asa, now seated beside and leaning against a tent while he smoked and glanced at the group of smiling faces. "Likewise, ez I cal'late, 'bout ez near to heaven ez we'll git on arth," whereupon Hazel gave him a tender glance that spoke volumes.

"Its romance and happy escape from conventionalities is its best charm to me," responded Stacy, "or rather its semblance of return to primitive conditions of life."

"You mean 'the world forgotten and by the world forgot,'" queried Hazel smilingly, "or is it the joy of utter isolation that adds that charm?"

"I wouldn't care to be here alone," added the more matter-of-fact Molly.

"Nor I," chimed in Bertha. "No all-alones for me or Robinson Crusoe meditations. I want company, fun, laughter, and companions."

But conversation among six is usually a dismal failure, and Hazel, quite conscious of this, soon picked up her banjo and within five minutes all the girls were joining in her long list of plantation ballads, and so the evening passed.

To Stacy, however, the day with its need of action, of doing something, was the most enjoyable; and then, somehow, he, quick to catch others' moods and emotions, imagined that Hazel's was not in harmony with his or him. She was charmingly polite and interested in all he said, gave him now and then the consolation of inferred praise or commendation, played the hostess with her invariable thoughtfulness, but beneath all this he suspected that she still distrusted him, or was chilled from some unknown source.

This intuition had also kept him from joining in or attempting to inspire general conversation after they gathered about the fire, and keenly critical of

the art of polite small talk in others, he saw that it was all forced and stilted. He was not disposed to sulk, only sure that no one was seriously anxious to talk, and very glad when Hazel put an end to it with her banjo and songs. To watch her supple fingers skip up and down the strings, or sweep across them, and her exquisite face and expressive eyes reflecting the firelight, was of far more interest than exchanging polite phrases with the other girls, with whom he as yet was scarcely acquainted.

And then he smoked fiercely, steadily, and persistently, cigar after cigar, as was his way when worried, or thinking out some problem.

By and by, when the evening had grown more chill, the fire less bright, and Hazel having concluded her songs with "Suwanee River," and then fallen to picking the chords of "Mamma's Little Alabama Coon," he arose, piled more fuel on the glowing embers, then lay down beside them, intently watching the uprising flames.

And just then, as Hazel laid her banjo aside, there came from Uncle Asa's bowed head a faint snore!

It served as a signal, also, for on the instant Hazel arose with a smiling glance at her father, up came the other girls in one-two-three order, nodded and whispered good-nights to Stacy, and vanished into their tent.

For another long five minutes Stacy lay where he was, then out from her tent came Hazel, stepped to where her father sat dozing, stooped and patted his face. "You must wake up, father," she said, "and go to bed; you will catch cold." Then, half lifting him, she led him into his tent.

In a moment she emerged and glanced at Stacy, still recumbent. "You have not enjoyed this evening overmuch, have you?" she half whispered with faint smile.

"Oh, yes, fairly well," he returned; "your singing especially, and the romance of this spot. About all I expected. I am like the tramp," he added, after a pause, "who asserted that a long career of adversity had taught him to hope for everything and expect nothing."

"An excellent conclusion," she responded, quickly taking two steps towards her own tent, then halting, "but — but hadn't you better turn in, too? I — I am afraid it's lonesome out here."

For a long moment she gazed at him sidewise, half curiously, half pleadingly, while he, after one flash of his imperious eyes at her, turned to the fire again.

"I wish you would," she added more pleadingly. "I — I don't feel right to desert you in this way."

Only for another moment did this proud girl

thus proffer the olive branch and await response in vain, then came a second "good night," and she vanished into her tent.

"Father was right," she said to herself; "he is sulky."

And so he was, not intentionally perhaps, yet hurt by the continued cool indifference of this girl he had planned and plotted so much for. He knew that she now realized that the rescue of her heritage from the swindler was entirely from his personal thought and effort. He had not expected thanks — as yet. Had not even wished for them, or any mention of what he had done. Only he had expected that sometime during the day — a day he had practically stolen from pressing business needs — she would have shown him a trifle of gratitude, or wish for his happiness beyond ordinary, conventional politeness — just once!

She had been gay, jolly, full of good spirits and humor; played hostess at both meals in gracious manner, sang a long list of plantation songs and ballads without urging, shown the tenderest filial devotion to her father, and — polite coolness to him!

And just now with the moon sailing high overhead, the low monotone of the ocean not five rods away, the fire a mere glow of dying embers, and the only other sound, except the persistent wave-

wash, an occasional call from some marsh bird, Stacy felt akin to the solitude and loneliness of his surroundings.

"It can't be helped," he said to himself philosophically, after a long resumé of the day's disappointments. "If a woman will, she will, and if she won't, she won't, and that's the end on't, as the old rhyme says. It may be, too, that this feeling of obligation begins to gall her. It works that way sometimes. Or perhaps she imagines that I practically expect her to offer herself as payment for what I've done! There is no telling how a girl of her spirit will interpret any man's actions. I guess I had better keep away from Oakdale another month, Miss Hazel Iceberg, and let you see I am not expecting anything — not even friendship!"

All of which must be accepted as proof conclusive that Stacy was what Hazel had thought him — sulky. Also blessed with a correct conception of how she felt towards him.

And that fit of pique, that hour of lonely night meditation with only the ocean's voice, and a dying fire for consolation, so impressed him, so convinced him of the wisdom of keeping away from the cool, piquant Hazel for a time at least, that he now determined to do so — and did until circumstances forced another meeting.

And just now, so sore at heart was he and so little in the mood for sleep, that he heaped more fuel on the fire, pulled a blanket out from the tent where Uncle Asa was contentedly snoring, wrapped himself in it, lit another cigar and hugged his fit of sulks until midnight, then turned in.

He didn't know, fortunately, that Hazel remained wide awake during that almost two-hour vigil, that she twice peeped out to see him prone beside the fire, and that not until she heard him enter his tent did sleep come to her; also was perfectly conscious how he felt, and the reason for it.

Uncle Asa was up and out with the coming of dawn, and had a cheerily blazing fire going when the four rather dishevelled girls emerged from their tent.

"Thar's a pail o' fresh water I brought from the spring up back 'n' left in the fish house, gals," he said, after greeting them, "'n' some soap 'n' towels," and Hazel, who had wisely brought comb and brush, led the way to it. Stacy appeared soon after, and with his own toilet accessories betook himself to the wharf for ablutions. Breakfast was not as interesting a meal as the others had been; conversation was as limp, damp, and sticky as the table-spread and dishes, and not until the rising sun had cheered and warmed everybody was there any

exhibition of good spirits. When the inflowing tide made returning possible, Uncle Asa stowed the rolled-up bed clothes and dishes in the two boats, together with most of their lighter camp outfit, then called out that they were ready.

"One o' you gals kin go in the small boat with Mr. Whipple," he said, as they all gathered on the wharf, "'n' t'other three with me in the big un. That'll balance up."

And then came the question of who should be the one for Stacy to take.

Hazel, who had covertly watched him all the morning to measure his mood, but not once allowing her eyes to meet his, solved it in an instant.

"You go with Mr. Whipple, Jennie," she said to her Barre friend, decisively, "for he knows a few people in your city and you can tell him all about them." And piqued still more by Hazel's self-evident wish to avoid a tête-á-tête boat trip with him, Stacy assisted his selected companion into the small boat, and the start was made.

Of course these two had to talk now, and whether from an intuitive conception of Stacy's feelings towards Hazel, or spirit of mischief, will never be known, but the subject the fun-loving Jennie chose to enlarge upon and describe was her several visits to Oakdale, and enjoyment of them with

Uncle Asa's geniality and aid, also how Mr. Arthur Penrose was very much enamored of Hazel, with laughing comments upon his attentions and hopes in that connection. Then after almost an hour of this chatty and delightful (?) gossip, while he smoked fiercely and rowed more so, she added a final thrust by assuring him that she was going to remain in Oakdale another week, and had persuaded Mr. Penrose to stay also.

"We have a lot of fun all planned out," she added, as a last sip of wormwood tea to Stacy, "or Mr. Penrose has. He is going to take us all on a straw ride to the shore one day and to go bathing. We shall dig clams, of course, and cook them in the big pot Uncle Asa keeps in his fish house, and come home by moonlight. Then we girls are going to have a picnic in a grove up back of Hazel's schoolhouse, with a lot more, and there is a pavilion there to dance in. If you are going to be here, of course you can consider yourself invited to the picnic. Will you join us?"

"I thank you, and I assure you I should enjoy it," Stacy responded in ironical tone, "but I am sorry to say that I must leave this afternoon. I am only here on a business trip, so to speak. In fact, I stayed over a day just to go on this outing."

And all the while he felt that he would like to throw the dudish, cigarette-smoking Mr. Penrose into this creek at low tide, and watch him wade out of the mud!

Stacy arrived at the boat landing ahead of Uncle Asa, waited there with his voluble companion until he came, and when the party had all filed up the long board walk and halted at the foot of the lane, Stacy made his adieu with the best grace possible.

"I am sorry, my good friends, but I must leave you now," he asserted, consulting his watch and surveying the group with a smile. "I had planned to go to Barre yesterday on some special business; now I must go, and return to Albion to-night."

"I wished ye could stay longer," responded Uncle Asa regretfully, "but business is business, I s'pose. Hadn't I best hitch up, 'n' take ye to the train? I'd like to."

"No, thank you; I've a little matter to talk over with Sam," declared Stacy briskly, "and he is to take me up."

And then Hazel also proffered a quite unintentional sip of wormwood tea to Stacy.

"Molly's cousin from Barre has a straw ride to the shore planned for day after to-morrow," she said. "Can't you come back and join us, Mr.

Whipple? I — we would all be delighted to have you." And to Stacy's credit, he took his dose without a grimace.

"No, I thank you all very much, but I can't possibly," he answered smiling.

"You'd better relent and say yes," urged Molly. "Artie is the only gentleman, and we need two to take care of us."

"No, no, many thanks, but I positively can't," declared Stacy again. "I thank you all for this jolly outing, and hope I may have another some day — good-bye," and turned and left them.

A half hour later and after Hazel's three girl friends were returning villageward, a little exchange between them must now be quoted.

"I think he's perfectly splendid," asserted Jennie Oaks, "and all over eyes in love with Hazel besides. But he was so mad because she didn't offer to come up in the boat with him, he acted like a bear. I couldn't get him to talk for a long time. Why didn't she, girls; he is such a catch?"

"I know," responded Bertha Phinney sagely, "and I have put my foot in it, I guess."

"Oh, how? Tell us," chorused the other two eagerly; "how did you?"

"Promise me never to breathe it, hope to die you won't," demanded Bertha in awed whisper.

"Oh, yes, yes, tell us quick," they both promised as one, and halting to hear the mysterious secret.

"Well, I've no business to tell you," declared Bertha, "for I promised mother not to, but — but"— whispered —"he has had a deed of Bear Hole Swamp made out in Hazel's name, and father thinks he is going to buy it back from that man Uncle Asa sold it to, and give it to Hazel! What do you think of that, girls?"

"Oh! Oh! Isn't it grand!" asserted Molly. "He certainly means to marry Hazel if he can!"

"And I told Hazel yesterday," admitted Bertha in penitent tone.

"Then you have put your foot in it," rejoined Molly, vehemently.

"Both feet," added Jennie, "and that explains why she was so crusty to him all day. You have done a foolish thing, Bertha!"

And so she had, and in a very effective way.

"I dunno why you didn't offer to come back in the boat with Mr. Whipple; why didn't ye, girlie?" Uncle Asa queried of Hazel later on when alone with her. "I kinder thought you would, 'n'—'n' I kinder wanted to hev ye."

"I had my reason, father," she answered firmly, "for he would have thought I was anxious to be alone with him, and I am not."

CHAPTER XXVII

WITH Stacy now, to bring about a culmination of his plans and accomplish something, there seemed need of quick action. Time was speeding, their contract with the Barre Committee called for completion within two years, then specified payment for power delivered for a period of ten, and after that the town of Barre had agreed to reimburse the firm of Bemis, Colby & Company for all outlay, plus ten per cent., and own the land, dam, and power house, or continue to pay rental, and the aforesaid firm to retain ownership if they so chose. There was also a clause that if the two parties failed to agree upon rental after the ten years had expired, it should be left to arbitration. And it is needless to say that the keen Stacy had made the ten years' rental high enough to cover the probable cost of all outlay except the original one for land.

His main purpose in visiting Barre now was to assure its Committee that power would be ready for delivery on time; with a minor one, to meet

and see what manner of man this J. Smith Alton was, who, while a member of that Committee, had probably betrayed its intentions and contract to La Rosa Carmen, and she to Otero, as he was positive.

He arranged by telephone that Davis, chairman of this committee of five, should meet him at the hotel within an hour after his arrival, assured him that he had a suitable site purchased, and should have it surveyed and begin work within a month; also that they need have no fear but that power would be ready for Barre's use within the time specified.

"But what about the story I've heard of this man, Otero, having bought the site you intended to use, the Bear Hole Swamp?" queried Davis after this. "What is his game?"

"Extortion, plain, ordinary extortion," returned Stacy, smiling. "He heard through a woman, named Carmen, what your plans were and ours. Came here with a backer of his named Curtis North, alias Pentecost Curtis, both unprincipled sharpers. They nosed and moused around until I arrived, then this Otero met me with a fake proposition about furnishing us with contract labor, and later on — as I planned to let him — bought Bear Hole Swamp of its owner, Asa Webster, at a stiff price.

The other site, the one I wanted, I had already bought, however," and Stacy smiled knowingly, as one who had euchred the other fellow most effectively.

"But who gave our plans away?" demanded Davis. "I'd like to know that right now. It was despicable!"

"Rather," drawled Stacy, stroking his mustache and smiling serenely. "But I am not mixing in on that. I've got a deed of an elegant site, the Rocky Glen Gorge, duly recorded. We shall have our dam built and contract completed on time, and Messrs. Otero, Curtis, and Carmen, *et al.*, can use Bear Hole Swamp to fish in summers if they like. It's an elegant spot for that purpose — I tried it! And never did I flounder and crawl through a more impassable morass, with Mohawk briars so thick you couldn't cut through them, and black flies by the billion! I'd give a cool hundred to drop this Miss Carmen into it on a hot July day," and Stacy chuckled at the humor of it.

"You know her then?" queried Davis curiously.

"By reputation, and her assistance to these two sharpers," returned Stacy adroitly. "She has a character and name much like this swamp."

"But who gave our plans away, I want to know,"

again demanded Davis; "have you any idea, Mr. Whipple?"

Then Stacy glanced at a Knight Templar charm which Davis wore, looked around the hotel office to see no one was near, and back to Davis again.

"You are a K. T., I observe," he said in a low tone; "so am I. And now on the square, and under the — — — is Mr. J. Smith Alton a Mason?"

"No, damn him, no!" almost shouted Davis, instantly realizing who had so betrayed a trust. "He has been playing fast and loose for some time here now, owes everybody he can to the limit, and — by Jove, I see it all, and it's politics! He has been alderman, councilman, and up again for that this fall. I don't like him or any man of his morals, but he was forced onto the Committee. And so it's him, is it?"

"Well, I have almost conclusive proof that it is," returned Stacy in convincing tone. "He has been sporting around with this Carmen woman this summer in Albion. A trusted clerk in my office overheard her tell this Otero that he gave your plans away to her, and she admitted receiving a diamond bracelet as a go-between, and promise of graft from some source. These are the facts; piece them together as you please and form your own conclu-

sions. I am not charging your Mr. J. Smith Alton with anything. But I shall try to play the Bemis, Colby & Company hand without losing tricks, however. Later on, when I am here again, Brother Davis, I'll tell you another story of more interest. In the meantime, and without being quoted, I might suggest that this city could elect a substitute for J. S. Alton, with benefit to itself. Also, if he owes you anything, the sooner you collect it, the better."

And that night when Stacy boarded the last train to Albion he felt that he had partially squared himself with one sneak.

"The world is full of them," he said to himself, returning to cynicism again. "They crop up on all sides and in all walks. Graft rules our city politics, chicanery and trickery are all about, and trusts dominate business, with railroad rebating to assist them."

A lurking sense of annoyance over the outcome of his visit to Oakdale also vexed him, and visions of the cigarette-smoking Penrose intruding; also of him posing as the master spirit of the coming straw ride and attentions to Hazel. Stacy wasn't jealous exactly, yet that green-eyed monster was blinking at him from obscurity in vexing manner.

"I think I acted like a fool," he admitted to him-

self after an hour of this meditation while the train sped on. "When she came out to send her father to bed and gave me a chance to say a nice word, I only sulked like a jackanapes, as I was."

It was past midnight when he arrived in Albion. A seven-hour sleep, bath, good breakfast, some coddling and soothing words from his aunt restored his spirits; on the way down town he bought a New York paper, glanced over it for an advertisement of Curtis & Company, then almost shouted with satisfaction, for now a new one stared at him in the shape of an offer of two shares of the Passaic Reclaiming Company common stock, par value one hundred dollars each, to all purchasers of a house-lot at four hundred dollars. This offer, so that advertisement stated, would last for only a few days. It had the usual flamboyant big-type caption, with footnote, to write for map of the company's property, and make selection before the best lots were all taken.

"We'll take a fall out of you, Mr. Pentecost Whiskers," Stacy said to himself after perusing this, "and soon, too! I must get busy now!"

He did, too, for after an hour's discussion of their own affairs with Colby, he went to a photographer's, had copies of the Pentecost Curtis signature made from a leaf of the Barre Hotel

register (which he had bought from its clerk for one dollar), two of the Curtis North one on Uncle Asa's mine certificate, and some of that swindler's own face and watch fob. Then, after a consultation of time-tables, he wired Harkins to meet him in New York at the Holland House with Tygson and the necessary requisition papers, and to wire answer when.

With so much accomplished towards his new trap for these two villains, he next set about the preparation of a write-up of Curtis North, alias Pentecost Curtis, and confederate, Leon Otero. Their history, detailing their occupation and adventures in Rawhide, with dates and incidents; their visits to Oakdale and Barre, present location and business, even condensed as Stacy wrote it, made a lengthy document. He had two typewritten copies made of it, attached the several photographs, and then felt he was ready, as indeed he was.

It took him nearly all day, and after the close of business, as Ike was leaving the office, Stacy took him one side for consultation.

"Well, my boy," he said, "did you put a thorn into that Otero's side while I was away?"

"I did and a long one," returned Ike, buoyantly, "the very night you left here. I made the rounds of the hotels, found he was stopping at the New

City, and that eve I strolled in about seven, had a friend on watch, and when Otero came out of the dining-room, my friend came in, greeted me cordially, then we took seats near Otero, and my friend told me the great joke he recently heard in Barre. Put on all the frills, too, about knowing Davis of the Committee, and how Bemis, Colby & Company were going right ahead to dam the Rocky Gorge brook for their power site. Oh, it worked fine, and the little pup kept edging his chair up to us so as not to miss a word. Two days after I sent my friend around to the hotel, and found that Otero left town the day after we worked the spell on him."

"Good! good!" rejoined Stacy, "and now keep quiet. I may want you to do a little more sleuthing later on." And Stacy hurried away, for he had many matters to attend to.

Next day, to make sure of his ground, or rather to know what steps Harkins must take in order to arrest both Curtis North and Otero and take them back to Nevada, if that should be decided upon, Stacy consulted their attorney, and stated the case, using no names, however. And now, armed with his deadly parallel write-up, with photographs of Curtis North, his watch fob, original signature, and later alias attached to both, and this legal dictum

for guidance, Stacy, feeling that he held the winning hand, went to their office once more.

And there awaiting him was a telegram from Harkins:

"Meet you at Holland, the fourteenth. Get letters to enable me to obtain extradition."

"Of course!" exclaimed Stacy gleefully. "And now, my friend, I have you on the hip!"

And then Colby faced around from his desk and favored Stacy with a half-humorous and decidedly sarcastic smile.

"Say, old man," he ejaculated with a broader grin, "you are busier than a dog full of fleas! Here you've been in town two days, and this is the first time you've paused to sit down! What's eating you, anyhow? Hath love made you mad?"

"No, but Curtis North has," rejoined Stacy, smiling and getting at the point at once, "and we've got to have that Bear Hole Swamp for our reservoir, and just now Curtis North or Pal Otero holds a deed of it. Paid Uncle Asa, 'Uncle Rube' you call him, nine thousand, five hundred for it!"

"Well, I don't wonder you've got fleas," chuckled Colby. "What do you propose to do about it?"

"Why, twist this villain, and make him or Otero sign a deed for it for one dollar and other considera-

tions, said considerations being what I've been working up the past two days," asserted Stacy, buoyantly. "I've got him where I want him!"

"You think you have," responded Colby with sarcastic smile. "Now I know the shortcake maid has upset your sanity! Why, man alive, you couldn't scare that old reprobate with a hangman's noose!"

"He will see one dangling before I'm done with him," asserted Stacy, lighting a cigar and tipping back in his chair to enjoy himself. "And now, my boy, I've another bombshell for you and a scheme to make a million, you and I! Bear Hole Swamp will make a reservoir big enough to turn ten thousand spindles or run a score of shops at practically no investment for us except the power plant. We shall buy the land below it, dike the power along for a mile or so, dig out a nice harbor close by, advertise the layout, and in two years sell land at any old price, and you are in on the game! There's millions in it, my boy!"

"Going to build a shop and start making eye-wash, my dear Colonel Sellers," rejoined Colby, "or some new kidney cure from your swamp roots?" Then in commiserating tone, "I first thought it was love madness, my poor fellow; now I know you've got incipient paresis or need a

strait-jacket! Better go back to your sweet simplicity, sing coon songs with her evenings, and boss our workmen daytimes. This hallucination will blow over in due time."

"Bet you an even hundred I succeed with old Curtis North," responded Stacy defiantly, "and you're not in on the land deal, either. Give me a check for five hundred. I'm going to New York to-night."

"That sounds natural and familiar, anyhow," laughed Colby, filling one out. "I shan't give up hope for you yet. I think the Oakdale girl is the only cure for you, however." And so the interview ended.

Stacy's next move was to write to Uncle Asa, bidding him make ready and come to New York on the night train out of Oakdale on the twelfth, and promising to meet him there on his arrival.

Before signing it, he paused to consider an additional plan in this connection.

"Why not ask him to bring Hazel along?" he said to himself. Then after a long deliberation added, "No, she'll think I'm too anxious; and as her pa would say, 'Don't try to bake till your oven's hot, my boy,'" then signed and sealed the letter.

A little of the Mother Eve in Hazel came to the surface when this letter arrived, for she, recogniz-

ing Stacy's writing, watched her father curiously while he read it.

"Did — did he say anything about his visit here and the camping-out party?" she queried naïvely and with well-simulated indifference.

Then Uncle Asa, who could read her mind as easily as she could his, smiled benignly with a twinkle in his eyes. "No, girlie," he responded, watching her, "Oakdale's only a flag station in his life, 'n' I cal'late he's forgot ye by now. He wants me to meet him in New York in three days 'n' we're goin' to hev a lot o' fun with that mine sharper! Oh, I've got a hull circus a-comin', I hev, 'n' a chance to sass him good 'n' hard in the bargain. I jist can't wait till I git at him. 'N' the little weasel, too," he added after a chuckle. "I've a great notion to ketch a few snakes 'n' take 'em along in a box ez a reminder to him, I hev! By the great horn spoon, I will, too!"

And he did.

CHAPTER XXVIII

FOR over six months now, or since early spring, Curtis North — as we must call him — had devoted about all his time and attention, also considerable money, to the launching and development of his new swindling scheme of the Passaic Reclaiming and Development Company. He began by buying about one hundred acres of salt marsh land along the bank of this ocean estuary, whose only value was its annual crop of coarse hay and a few billion mosquitoes, also obtaining options on a thousand or more acres (three-quarters of the payment specified to be in company stock if taken), then had it surveyed, a map made showing a bird's-eye view of an embryo city with avenues, streets, a few houses along the bordering river, a wharf with pleasure boats alongside, and a well-loaded excursion steamer nearing it, and other details usually thrown in by keen artists who prepare these alluring baits to catch the unwary. He also hired a few Italians with a manager and set them at work driving spiles and building a cheap wharf on the

river border and midway of his land, also ditching alongside and filling in a roadway to the upland.

"We've got to make a bluff in order to scoop the suckers," he asserted to Otero buoyantly when beginning this work. "It's money thrown into the mud, I know, but it must be done, and I'll make 'em pay it back tenfold."

In the meantime, he talked continuously, persistently, and like an oracle among his Wall Street acquaintances about his plans and prospects of money-making, handed out hundreds of his maps to all who would glance at them, left bunches in hotel offices, scattered them in depot waiting-rooms, hired boys to tuck them under doors in residential streets, paid a daily paper a round sum for a two-column write-up, and, in short, adopted the usual and invariable methods of exploiting such schemes. Then, timing his advertisements for the sale of bonds at the time when public curiosity was aroused sufficiently, he found scores of fatuous buyers for them. Strange as the fact may seem, a good many were among the keen-witted cult of Wall Street. His next move, and brought about by the usual methods of stock gamblers, was to get both the common stock and bonds of his swindling company listed on the curb — that indefinite mart where all

such often worthless securities are traded in; an arena, so to speak, where these speculative liars toss worthless dice back and forth to amuse themselves, and get one another short or long as the case may be.

Of course this resulted in the daily quotations of the P. R. & D. stock and bonds in all papers, and accomplished what he intended — a still wider publicity for his scheme. He would also now and then, aided by a confederate or two, engineer a small corner in the P. R. & D. marked cards, get a few of the gay and festive crowd of gamblers short of them, and laugh in his sleeve when they bid them up in a scramble to cover.

He had also sold about fifty thousand dollars worth of the quarter-million of bonds he had had printed when Otero, via Carmen and her friend, J. Smith Alton, gave him what seemed a wide-open chance to work a side-swindle by buying the intended dam site selected by Bemis, Colby and Company, and making them pay smartly for it.

And, as Stacy surmised, it was La Rosa Carmen with her unholy desire to avenge her desertion by him and her influence upon Otero, that brought this about.

The investment of the ten thousand dollars in this was a mere bagatelle to Curtis North, however,

and only done to give his faithful ally, Otero, a pat on the back and a chance to make a few thousand to spend upon his adored countrywoman, Carmen.

"You can run that scheme to suit yourself, boy, and have all the fun and half the profit," he said to Otero in grandiloquent tone upon drawing a check for that amount. "Be careful not to mix me up in the deal, however, and don't get caught yourself. All I want is to give you a chance to show your smartness, and my money back as soon as these contractors settle."

He little realized how deep a pit was being dug for himself, how the would-be biter would get bitten, or how Nemesis in the persons of Stacy, Harkins, Tygson, *et al.*, were hot upon his trail, however.

Like an ostrich that hides its head in the sand and believes its body out of danger, so did Curtis North feel sure that change of name, a few thousand miles' separation from his Rawhide swindling location, the possession of much money, and metamorphosis into an affluent financier rendered him immune from any and all retribution. While not forgetting the fatal night in Rawhide that added about sixty thousand dollars to his ill-gotten gains, and sent him east in a hurry, six years of prosperity

and the garnering of a half-million more had made that episode seem a faint shadow upon the horizon of his past. He was now rotund, smiling, buoyant, cynical, quite content with his own success as an all-round swindler, toadied to all who had more money than himself, was an arrant hypocrite, felt only contempt for all honest toilers, and inclined to adopt that shibboleth of arrogant wealth, "The public be damned."

And this was a concise and to-the-point resumé of Curtis North and the Passaic Reclaiming and Development Company that night when Stacy Whipple, an avenging David, landed in New York ready to assault this modern and iniquitous Goliath. And the first pebble he picked up on arriving at the Holland House was a map of that swindling scheme recently left on one of its writing-room tables. He gave a long-drawn "humph-hum" of satisfaction as he glanced it over and read the alluring prospectus on its reverse side, then put it in his long pocketbook.

"We are on deck at the nick of time, I guess," he said to himself then, "and to catch you flush with money and able to settle, you old villain. Hope Harkins will arrive on time."

He next bought a copy of each evening paper, left them in his room, ate a good supper, went to the

theatre and, as might be expected, while there scanned the crowd of faces to see if perchance this scheming swindler might be among them. On his return, he conned over that bunch of papers, found two in which the stock premium advertisement of Curtis and Company appeared, and happening to glance down the column of stock market quotations discovered "Passaic Development — fourteen and one-quarter bid, fifteen asked," among the curb securities.

Then he gave a prolonged whistle of astonishment!

"Well, you are flying high," he exclaimed, "and no mistake! Also right in the swim, you swelled-up toad! Fourteen and a quarter bid for one share of hot-air bluff, is it? I don't wonder Puck said, 'What fools these mortals be!'" Then Stacy began his castle building again and added, "Wonder how 'Pentecost Curtis, the well-known promoter, arrested for murder,' in staring capitals in all the papers, will look to you when you start west with Harkins? I must have a reporter on hand when the trick is turned, that's certain!"

And so hilarious was Stacy over his prospects and so anxious to consummate his plans and "scoop" this reprobate, that he found sleep an elusive matter that night.

Next morning, and with two days on his hands before Uncle Asa and Harkins were to arrive, he hied himself away to hunt up the location and look over this great development scheme. The information in the prospectus, and the fact that it was within three miles of Newark's outskirts made that easy, and here, first reconnoitering the dozen or so men at work ditching or road or wharf building to make sure that Curtis was not among them, Stacy advanced as if on a curiosity quest and made a general survey of what had been done.

Some money had been spent here, also, in a passable roadway built out from the upland border a half-mile across the marsh, and in an out-jutting wharf and spile-protected levee to right and left of this.

"You certainly are putting up a good bluff," he said to himself after a hasty look around in which he noted two small gangs of men lazily at work on both ends of his levee. Then glancing into one of the ditches alongside the graveled roadway out of which the tide was ebbing, he added, "Sell house-lots here! Why, the nerve of that man is monumental, colossal, and past understanding!"

Then betook himself back to New York.

That afternoon he, using an introductory letter from his own attorney in Albion, called upon one

in New York and obtained further information upon the laws concerning the case in hand if, as he surmised, Harkins should make an arrest; of course without the use of names.

" There should be," the attorney said, " a warrant issued against the perpetrator of the crime of murder in the State of Nevada, or better still, an indictment should be found against him by the grand jury. Of course, having left the State he has not been arrested and the warrant or indictment still runs against him and if he is found at any time within the borders of the State of Nevada, he can be apprehended by a sheriff. Now the man in New York, who recognizes the fugitive and any other person, the sheriff in your case, who can make an affidavit, first, that a crime of murder has been committed by a man of a certain name in the State of Nevada (this can be the affidavit of the sheriff or of any other competent witness); second, the affidavit of the man in New York that the fugitive and the criminal is the same identical person, who has committed a crime in Nevada and is recognized by him and known by him in the State of New York. Affidavits like this are then annexed to the warrant or indictment, as the case may be, and the Governor of Nevada upon this evidence issues a requisition to the Governor of New York and sends

that requisition in the hands of a Nevada sheriff to the Governor of New York, who immediately orders extradition papers to issue. These extradition papers are directed to any person in the State of New York competent to serve judicial processes, that is, a sheriff or police officer, and authorizes the arrest of the person named therein, the fugitive. Upon his arrest, it is the practice in the State of New York for the officer making the arrest to take the man in company with the Nevada sheriff on board the cars and convey him as far as the State line, where he turns him over to the sheriff from Nevada, who carries him to his destination.

"There is no way in which any bond can be given in a case of this kind. The only thing possible would be a writ of habeas corpus, into which you do not want to go. That would simply be a chance for him to be heard in New York before he was delivered to the sheriff of Nevada."

And so justice and the forthcoming doom of this despicable and heartless scoundrel were duly and legally prepared for by Stacy, who did not mean to leave any loopholes for escape, or get his own fingers caught in any trap-springing operation.

A forewarning of it, or at least the probable failure of the Oakdale scheme, came to Curtis North

when Otero hastened back from Albion to acquaint him with Ike's disclosure.

"I haf suspicion ze talk of zese two fellows vas made for me to hear," he asserted to his superior knave after relating it in their private office in low tone, so that the clerk and stenographer in the outer one could not hear. "One of them vas in ze hotel that day to find eef I vas there, a tall fellow vit big hands, und Miss Carmen says it ees one who ees in that man Whipple's office. Und I haf suspicion of somedings else I haf never told you," he added more mysteriously. "Dis tall fellow, his name ees Williams, und a man of zat name come to where I haf room in ze city here und asked for me und you, too, ze week we vas in Barre und said he vanted to hire some men, und you know my card I gif Mr. Whipple in Barre vas a bluff."

Then the self-confident Curtis North began to stroke his beloved side-whiskers excitedly and stared sharply at Otero. "Why didn't you tell me about this man's asking for me?" he demanded anxiously after a pause. "How did you know but it was some sleuth?"

"I did not think so much of it zen," returned Otero evasively, "und I forgot it since until now. Vat I do think ees some trick haf been blayed on

us und ze swamp, ze tam swamp I bought, zey no want now. Miss Carmen says she know zey haf bought another in Oakdale."

And then Curtis North fairly glared at the diminutive pal he had so trusted. "You've got skinned in this game, and by an old farmer, too," he declared in derision, "and I am ashamed of you, you — you little damn fool; why that — that farmer is a mark, and you let him do you!

"And me out of ten thousand dollars, you driveling idiot," he added more contemptuously and louder, as it all dawned on him. "Just threw it into that swamp hole like the stupid jackass you were." And so angry was he now, he jumped up and stamped around the small office!

"This comes of getting befuddled and bedeviled by a scheming woman," he continued more scornfully and with rising wrath. "You got after that Carmen hag, she had a spite against this Whipple, as you admitted, and put up the job! Played you for a fool and called the turn! Also ten thousand dollars out of me, you — you imbecile ass!" Then, and cooling off a little, he sat down again.

And now, shrewd villain that he was, it began to dawn on him that some one's wits far keener than Asa Webster's, had been matched against his in this game of extortion.

"It's that Whipple fellow at the bottom of this, Leon," he declared, nodding in mysterious manner, and in cooler tone now. "He suspected your game that day in Barre, I'll bet, and went back to Oakdale and put up the job out of devilish cussedness! I'll bet, too, he was the one who called at your house!"

And just then, and for the first time in many years, Curtis North felt a queer sensation of guilty fear.

"It can't be possible that old farmer described me to this fellow, Whipple, and he recognized me as the one who sold him the Rawhide stock," he muttered half to himself. "By Jove, I hope not!"

It was not long ere a worse fear assailed him.

CHAPTER XXIX

"WELL, how are you, Uncle Asa?" was Stacy's greeting the third morning after his arrival in New York, when that cheerful optimist emerged from a sleeping car.

"Wal, I'm middlin'," he responded, grasping Stacy's hand, and with a "Here, leggo my bag," he added as he yanked it away from a young colored porter who had grabbed it.

"That is, I'm out o' that sweat box alive arter bumpin' my head more'n forty times tryin' to git my clothes on in the box shelf, 'n' I didn't sleep a wink, either.

"But I've had a heap o' fun," he continued, shaking with suppressed laughter and drawing Stacy one side from the crowding stream of arriving passengers. "More fun'n a barrel of monkeys! See that woman with the red nose?" he added, indicating a stout lady with meat-axe face and hair-mole on her chin, who was waddling by. "See this, too?" holding up a paper-wrapped box and choking another burst of laughter.

Then Stacy, curious to know the cause of Uncle Asa's hilarity, peeped through a rift in the brown-papered parcel he carried and saw three good-sized black snakes squirming in the wire box!

"What the devil did you fetch those for?" he ejaculated, astonished.

"Oh, fer the little weasel I'm goin' to sass," came the chuckling answer; "'n' say, talk 'bout a circus 'n' hullabaloo, wal, I stirred both up in the car this mornin', I did fer sartin! Ye see, I brung four snakes 'long, jest ez a sorter reminder o' B'ar Hole swamp to the little Mexican cuss, 'n' shoved the old rat trap I got 'em in under the shelf whar I war put by the nig who had charge o' the car. Wal, 'long in the night one on 'em got out, ye see, 'n' 'bout daylight the fun begun! I wa'n't asleep, jist layin' thar 'most suffocated, 'n' I heerd the darky come scufflin' down the aisle. I peeked out through the curtains 'n' saw him stoopin' to steal a pair o' shoes from under the bunk jist across from me, I cal'late, 'n' ez he pulled one out, one o' my snakes slid out on't right over his hand! 'N' talk 'bout a scart nigger! He war it, all right, fer he gave one screech o' 'God A'mighty, de debbil,' 'n' turned a flip-flap right over back; his head hit the floor with a thump 'n' when he riz, he riz a runnin'! All I could see war a streak o' white jacket a yellin',

'Snake, snake in de keer!' I cal'late he'd turned white, too, jist from skeer.

"The next minute that fat woman poked her head out, 'n' right under her nose war that snake, 'n' the yell she let out would 'a' lifted shingles, sartin! 'Twa'n't a second 'fore she bust out through the curtains in her nightgown, 'n' jist dove down the aisle arter the nig a-yellin' 'Snakes, snakes,' fit to split! I don't think 'twas over a minute 'fore everybody in the bunks had piled out jist as they war, 'n' into the next keer, I cal'late, scart silly!

"'N' then the conductor come in! 'What's the row!' he said to me, a-peekin' out 'n' laughin'.

"'Why, the nigger war took with jim-jams,' I said, 'jist ez he war stealin' a pair o' shoes, 'n' thought he saw a snake slip out o' one o' 'em!' 'I'll have him fired,' he said, 'to start sich a row,' 'n' then he went out 'n' fetched the bunch back to git dressed. I went at it, too, s'posin' the fun was all over 'n' then jist ez it war quietin' down, the nig came back where he war, 'n' liftin' up a bunk, out come that snake agin!"

"Well, what happened then?" queried Stacy, now choking back his laughter. "Was'— was the fat woman back then?"

"Yes, but she didn't stay back more'n a second,"

chuckled Uncle Asa, as they started on. "She grabbed most o' her clothes, jumped right into a man with one leg in his pants, 'n' the two on 'em jist rolled over in a bunch, he cussin' 'n' she screechin'! Oh, 'twar a circus, I tell ye, 'n' I'll laugh fer a month now.

"I'd 'a' got killed I s'pose if they'd found out I brung the snakes," he added, glancing back as they emerged from the depot, "but you kin bet I kept whist. I got square with the nig, too," he continued, chuckling again. "Ye see, 'long in the night I axed him to shove up the cover over my bunk — nobody in it, ye see —'n' he tried to skin me out o' two plunks, the dern thief, he did!

"'Ah can't do it, sah,' he said, 'less you pays two dollars moah, sah, dat's de rule ob de company, sah.'

"Guess he'll 'member last night a spell, howsomever," Uncle Asa added, chuckling again. And then Stacy steered this joke-loving humorist into a carriage and started for the Holland House.

"You'd better keep fast hold of your snakes," Stacy now cautioned him as they rode on, "or you'll start a bigger rumpus in the hotel than you did in the sleeping car. There will be a porter and bell boys to grab everything you bring, and if they see your snakes — well, we may both get into a scrape. I believe there is a city ordinance against

carrying them. I'll take charge of them." And he did, now re-wrapping the wire trap so that no one could discover its uncanny contents.

Later, when Stacy had piloted the irrepressible Uncle Asa to their suite of rooms, he sent a bell boy out for a telescope case and put the rat trap and snakes in it.

At breakfast, next in order, Uncle Asa's droll humor once more disclosed itself.

"I cal'late these Frenchified names fer jist old-fashioned ham 'n' eggs 'n' fried puddin' or sassige," he queried, glancing over the café menu, "is so they kin tuck on sich ungodly prices, ain't it, Stacy? Lamb chops á la suthin' or other dollar-fifty, Je-ru-se-lem, but that is chargin' some! 'N' Extra Sir-loin Steak in blazer three-fifty, 'n' planked á la Roosevelt four dollars, wow wow! Squab en cas-serole two-seventy-five," he continued, reading on, "'n' potatoes á la Holland House one dollar, 'n' coffee, quarter a cup! Say Mister Waiter," turning to the waiting one, "how much is a glass o' water, jist plain water, no á la in it?"

"Eet is no charge for ze water," returned the waiter, grinning and filling Uncle Asa's glass, "no charge, saire."

And then Stacy came to the rescue.

"You are my guest, Uncle Asa," he said smiling; "let me order breakfast." And he did, a most satisfying one. But when Uncle Asa noticed only eighty cents returned in change from the ten-dollar bill Stacy tendered in payment (and that left on the plate as a tip), he gasped again.

"It's jist a-eatin' money to eat here," he ejaculated, "'n' sorter sinful, too! Nice grub, o' course, best ever was, but sich prices is highway robbery!" Then, with a glance around at the bediamonded ladies wearing stunning Merry Widow hats, some sipping cocktails, and waiters in full dress, he added, "These folks don't git their livin' ketchin' lobsters at fifteen cents a pound, 'n' sellin' potatoes at fifty cents a bushel, I cal'late, Stacy?"

When the finger bowls and toothpicks on a silver tray were brought, he glanced up at the waiter quizzically. "Say, Mister Slick," he said with a twinkle in his eyes, "yew'd best tell the boss he's made a mistake in his price list 'n' left off the toothpicks! 'Cordin' to the rest, they'd sartinly ought to be fifty cents, anyhow!"

He added the crowning touch of absurdity, however, when Stacy now coolly lit a cigar. "Say, Stacy," he then whispered across the table, "they've ben watchin' me curis like 'round here I've noticed,

'n' grinnin', but s'pose I pulled out my old corncob 'n' lit up now? Wouldn't that joggle 'em some?

"'N' how'd it work," he added after a pause and chuckling, "ef I'd brought in my box o' snakes 'n' jist let 'em loose here? I'd git sent to jail, I s'pose, but"— snorting with suppressed laughter — "it'ud be wuth it to see the crowd vamoose, I swow! They'd start livelier'n the nig did when the snake come out o' the shoe, 'n' he went some!"

And unable to control himself longer, Uncle Asa exploded in laughter.

He followed Stacy out of the breakfast room, still chuckling, and not until their own suite was reached, did he speak again.

"I s'pose I am out o' place here, 'n' a mark to be laughed at," he then said, penitently, "'n' mebbe ye're 'shamed o' me, Mr. Whipple, but — wal, them wimmen, 'n' them waiters like dudes, 'n' them prices set me agoin'! 'N' how folks kin go in thar 'n' stand fer't, I can't see! Why, it jist looks like they wanted to be skinned, it do! And say," he added, glancing around the luxuriously furnished room they were in, "What do they charge for lodgin' here, Stacy?"

"Why, these two rooms are each eight dollars

a day," laughed Stacy, "but you needn't mind. You are my guest, you know."

"Gee whittaker crackee," exclaimed Uncle Asa, "but this is wuss'n that breakfast, Stacy! 'N' 'tain't right to burn money this way, either, with folks in this world a-starvin', too! 'Tain't right, I say! Let's git out 'n' find some cheaper spot. I thought I knew suthin' 'bout city life," he added musingly, after a pause, "but I don't know the beginnin', even! 'N' whar do folks here git their money, I'd like to know? Do they print it themselves?"

"Some do," returned Stacy laconically, "or what amounts to the same thing, work some swindling game on the unwary, as Curtis North has been doing."

"'N' this is the way my four thousand went I'd scraped 'n' saved fer Hazel," asserted Uncle Asa, seeing a light. "Jist blowed by that whiskered hypocrite who said he come to Oakdale to do the Lord's work, 'n' prayed in meetin', ez he did! 'N' I took him fishin', too," he added musingly, "'n' picked out the best holes, 'n' sent him ahead to fish 'em 'n' made Hazel make us a shortcake, likewise! Also a biled-down drivilin' idjit o' myself same time, I did!"

And just then, as if to accentuate Uncle Asa's humiliation and recall their errand here, a bell-boy's knock came, and a telegram, reading, "Stopped off at Albany to get requisition. Shall arrive at two-thirty, Harkins," was handed to Stacy.

"We have four hours to wait, Uncle Asa," Stacy now asserted, consulting his watch and pursing his lips while he gave matters a mental round-up. "Harkins will need an assistant officer to make the arrest, I'd better leave you here in safe-keeping, and go to see about it, or have one ready on call. Harkins must decide how we shall proceed."

And just now the stern seriousness and vital importance of the coming climax to his plans obliterated all else in Stacy's mind.

And for ample reasons, also.

For over two months now, he had been conspiring to bring this about, and not only mete out justice to two despicable scoundrels, but rescue Hazel's heritage and Bear Hole Swamp as part of the complication. The latter purpose was the more important one to Stacy, and just how it would work out was a question. He had the necessary cards to play this restitution game. Justice, that blind goddess, in the person of Harkins, was also now speeding citywards at about one mile a minute as Stacy knew, but no move or decision how to move

must be made until the keen-witted and legally well-informed Rawhide marshal arrived.

"I'd better get everything ready," Stacy next determined, voicing this to his companion, "while you remain here in seclusion and read the papers."

As always with him, to decide meant to act at once, and with a "You stay here; bye-bye, Uncle Asa," he left the room and in five minutes up came a boy with all the morning papers. He was gone three hours, returned, took Uncle Asa down to lunch, and at just three-ten there came a knock on their door, and Harkins and the yellow-haired giant, Tygson, were ushered in.

Introductions came next, and then Stacy disclosed his plans.

"I've got my write-up all ready," he said, now producing it. "Also Uncle Asa here as a witness to convince Curtis North that we know him. He is now booming this other swindling scheme I wrote you about, which I have included in his obituary, as you can see; and now what is your plan, Jim?"

"Well," returned that officer, smiling as he glanced over that six-page document, "it seems probable our friend will weaken at sight of his biog. with photographs attached and sign any old thing to get possession of it and rid of you. If he won't, then it's me next, and arrest for murder. I must

do that, anyway, after obtaining the legal papers I have, that's positive. My theory and measure of the man," he added after a pause, "is, he is an arrant coward, a poltroon at heart. He will concoct fake schemes, tell plausible lies, steal cards in a poker game, even stab a man in the back, if need be, or club a drunken miner, as he did, but when we walk in on him and demand what we shall, he will squash right out, go into his boots like a wet rag. I wouldn't be surprised if he went onto his knees and bellowed like a calf for mercy when I arrest him, as I must. Have you the deed you want signed with you?"

"Sure," responded Stacy, now drawing it forth; "all filled out properly and ready for signature to make it legal." Then he passed it to Harkins.

"Know ye all men to whom these presents shall come, greeting: that I, Leon Otero, for one dollar and other considerations to me in hand paid, do hereby deed, grant, assign and transfer to Miss Hazel Webster, her heirs and assigns, all right, title and claim"— read Harkins after glancing the deed over, then stopped abruptly and looked at Stacy, then at Uncle Asa.

"Your daughter, Mr. Webster, I infer?" he queried, smiling.

"'Tis, sartin," Uncle Asa admitted, flushing and

swallowing a lump, "but — but"— with grateful glance at Stacy —"it kinder took me by s'prise. Yew'd best change it, Mr. Whipple," he added, choking again, and extending his hand to Stacy. "'Tain't —'tain't right to give it to her arter all ye've done fer me. Make it in yer own name."

"Too late," asserted Stacy briskly, with a light laugh; "besides I want the fun of buying it back from Hazel, as I must later — if we get this deed signed at all!"

"If we do," rejoined Harkins, smiling again at Stacy, "you can no doubt buy it of her for one dollar and other considerations (I hope), or maybe there won't be any need of it, anyhow?"

And then all four of these men smiled broadly at this hint of a happy consummation.

"The question now," declared Stacy more seriously, "is whether we go to the lair of 'his whiskers' this afternoon, or wait till to-morrow? I presume you will have to go back as soon as you make the arrest, Jim?"

"To save expense and legal complications, yes," returned Harkins. "It's a high-handed act, however, to yank even such a scoundrel out of his business without time to make some assignment of it. And he can't obtain bonds after my arrest for murder! Then I've been on a Pullman five days,

and you know what that means? I need a bath and one night's sleep, anyhow!

"We'd best keep shady or if we go out, go separately," he added after a moment's thought. "If our bird was to spy us together he'd fly the coop in two hours!"

And he would have flown in less time, had he had even a hint of who were now in the city and what their mission was.

Matters were adjusted in a secretive manner, however, for Stacy took Uncle Asa to one theater that evening, Harkins went to another, while the Swede, by the latter's advice, remained in seclusion. The three chief actors in the coming drama met again late that evening, discussed and rehearsed their separate parts, and armed and equipped as the law directs, with another officer to assist Harkins, started at ten the next morning for the Mills Building and lair of Curtis North.

To add the spice of fun he hoped to obtain, Uncle Asa also carried his box of snakes.

CHAPTER XXX

WHILE coming events may or may not cast their shadows before, it is an indisputable fact that crime forecasts its own retribution. Commit one felonious act, and it is as if the whole world were snow-covered and tracks left behind each criminal! The greater the crime against God or man, the deeper seem those fatal footprints, as if even the blind might pursue! With conscience once stung by the venom of crime, its persistent shadow pursues even the most hardened sinner. It looks out from dark alleys, peers through the cracks of doors, watches with sinister eye from around corners, taps on the wainscot in the stilly night, pulses through the air in uncanny whispers, and the ominous patter of its avenging steps seems ever in pursuit. A winged Nemesis — black, baleful, vengeful, merciless — that can and will pursue untiringly, above, below, and all about; and ever in wait to mete out inflexible justice!

For six years now, or since that fatal night when he had dealt a merciless blow to a drunken miner, then cut loose his belt of gold while yet dying,

Curtis North had never been quite free from this insidious, carking fear. Not pity for the besotted man he had slain, only a vague, never absent fear, that sooner or later some retribution might overtake him. He was vain, pompous, arrogant, even defiant with his attained wealth, scornful of all laws, juries, or justice; believed himself immune to any danger from them, selfish to a degree that was disgusting, and yet beneath all this armor of self-complacency and bumptious conceit, the tiny worm of retributive fear gnawed at his vitals.

And now, since Otero had brought news of his discomfiture, sure that Stacy Whipple was its cause, and most likely had also conferred with the Oakdale farmer, once swindled by him, and suspected his identity as well, Curtis North began to grow uneasy. So certain did he become after three days of this insidious fear that an avenger was on his trail, that he now thought it best as a matter of precaution to begin the closing up of his business ventures, secure all the money he could lay his hands upon, and be ready to leave for some foreign country on an hour's notice, if advisable. To this end, and without notifying Otero of his plans or fears, he withdrew large sums in bills of big denomination from the two banks where he kept deposits,

secured cashiers' checks for most of both balances left, and then obtained the sailing dates of all outgoing steamers for the next two weeks, and the destination of each.

And then so shrewd was this old fox that he — two hours after Stacy met Uncle Asa with his box of snakes — began the examination of all the principal hotel registers to see if perchance this man, Whipple, had arrived at any of them. And so close a call was it, or by the fortuitous straw of chance, that he was halted at the Waldorf by meeting a rich Cuban planter — to whom he had been trying to sell a block of his Passaic bonds — and postponed calling at the Holland House until next day!

To land this big plum and "easy mark" as Curtis North thought him now, and at once, and so secure about ten thousand dollars more, seemed more imperative than a further pursuit of hotel registers that day. To this pleasant and remunerative task he now applied himself diligently, wined and dined his victim that evening, took him to a theater, and after so much preliminary work, made a positive date to meet him at his office at ten-thirty, sharp, the next day.

And at nine-forty-five exactly of that same day, Stacy, Uncle Asa, Harkins, Tygson, and the assist-

ant officer entered the Mills Building, stepped into an express elevator and were shot up to Floor Twenty-two in a jiffy!

"You stay outside," Harkins said to his assistant as they advanced to room 210, "and when I whistle, you come in quick."

Then Stacy — a trifle nervous, perhaps — opened the door and led the way into the lair of Curtis North.

As he half expected, he now found himself in an outer office with bookkeeper and stenographer only, at work.

"We wish to see Mr. Curtis," he said to the former, who glanced curiously at the party.

"Name, please?" came the response in civil tone.

"You can say we called to see about investing in some bonds," replied Stacy, nonchalantly.

In a moment more a door was opened from within the inner office and a "This way, please," gave the needed permission.

And just then Stacy's heart gave a sudden leap of keen anxiety and suspense.

The crucial moment had come.

He had wondered many times how this arch-swindler would meet Harkins and himself — whether defiantly, cravenly, or with virtuous indignation. He felt almost sure, however, from his

measure of the man, that he would take his medicine with the sang-froid and bravado of a polished scoundrel and dead-game sport combined, and without a protest.

And Stacy was right, for as the party filed in, Stacy leading, Curtis looked up from his desk, gave one quick glance at the four faces, the flush vanished from his own, and he faced around and stared at his enemies defiantly.

"Good morning, Mr. North," was Stacy's offhand greeting; "this is my friend Mr. Harkins from Rawhide, Mr. Tygson also, and Mr. Asa Webster from Oakdale," he added, thus introducing them. "I met you in Barre last summer."

For one instant the keen eyes of the trapped swindler turned furtively from one to another of the four intruders, a quick biting of lips came next, he glanced around to where Otero sat, then back to the waiting, watching men.

"Well, gentlemen," he said almost defiantly, yet with a tremor in his tone, "what can I do for you?"

"Oh, not much," returned Stacy nonchalantly again and drawing his deed from his inside coat pocket; "just your friend Otero's signature on this paper and yours as witness.

"For one dollar and other considerations," he

added, producing the bill and handing both to the watching man.

He took it, let the bill drop to the floor, opened and glanced over the deed, and wheeled around to Otero.

"Here, Leon, sign this," he then directed, affixed his own signature — Pentecost Curtis — in trembling hand, and passed the document back to Stacy.

"Anything else you want, sir?" he next queried with more bravado.

"My friend, Tygson, has a loan he wants paid back," responded Stacy incisively; "how much is it, Mr. Tygson?"

"I vants tirty tousand dollar, und in money," almost snarled the Swede. "Und I vants it now!"

"The loan's been running 'bout six years you see, Mr. North," explained Harkins, speaking for the first time, "and he's added interest."

"But this is — is robbery," gasped the trapped man, "and I — I —" catching at a straw, "haven't so much here."

"You can send your pal to the bank after it," rejoined Harkins resolutely now. "I've an officer waiting outside to keep him company."

No protest came to this, however, and hesitating a moment only, Curtis North turned, swung a safe door open, unlocked an inner till, fumbled over a

THE KEEN EYES OF THE TRAPPED SWINDLER TURNED FURTIVELY FROM ONE TO ANOTHER OF THE FOUR INTRUDERS.—*Page 369.*

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plethoric pocketbook, then handed a small sheaf of bills of large denomination to Tygson.

"Anything else?" he next queried with admirable sang-froid and sarcasm combined; "any more loans you gentlemen want paid back?"

And then Harkins, who despite his official anxiety to arrest this cool villain was compelled to admire his nerve and audacity, spoke again.

"You take your medicine like an old sport, Mr. Curtis North, alias Pentecost Curtis," he said sternly. "But I must now and in the name of the law and State of Nevada, arrest you for the murder of one Yonn Johnson! Also you, Mr. Leon Otero," he continued, turning to him, then drew forth his warrants.

"Shall I read these writs to you?" he queried.

And then the sublime self-possession and nerve of this swindler gave way and he collapsed.

"My God!" he stammered, "th — this is all wrong! I — I never killed that man! He fell and broke his own skull! I — I — you can't prove it," then choked and shook with abject fear.

And then to end this painful scene, Harkins blew a shrill, short blast on a small whistle, his assistant entered speedily, and him he next addressed.

"These men are my prisoners," he said; "we will be decent to them and wait till they send for and

appoint some trustee of their business. We will then start west with them this afternoon."

"You understand, Mr. North," he added more sternly now and addressing him, "you can have one hour to fix up your business matters in this office and then we start, at one o'clock I think."

"What shall I do now, Brother Harkins," Stacy now asked; "anything for you?"

"There is my satchel to get and my hotel bill to be paid, Mr. Whipple," responded Harkins briskly; "also have a carriage here at twelve, sharp." And glad to escape so unpleasant a situation, Stacy and Uncle Asa left the office while Tygson remained.

He, poor fellow, scared half out of his wits, as he had been all along and with a small fortune now thrust inside his shirt, was sure to stick to his savior, Harkins, until the security of his own haunts was reached. Neither did Uncle Asa utter one of his intended sarcasms, for the sight of even this swindler who had robbed him now cringing in abject cowardice, and white as his whiskers, nullified that intention entirely.

"I'm kinder sorry fer the critter, arter all," he said to Stacy, when out of the office and still holding fast to his box of snakes. "But, by gosh, wa'n't he scart! I cal'lated he'd make the weasel sign the

deed, figgerin' that war all ye wanted, but gin up thirty thousand dollars 'thout a whimper! Jerusha, but that was bein' skeered some! 'N' when Mr. Harkins peeped, I could hear his teeth rattle! I s'pose he'll hev to swing, won't he?" he added after a pause. "But — wal, I hope they'll jug him fer life 'stead o' that. His wiltin' so kinder teched me."

"He gave up much easier than I expected," rejoined Stacy, "and my write-up was all wasted. Harkins may use it, however, in court."

But this bumptious knave and arrant coward combined, as might be expected, tried the only hope he had now for escape, and within ten minutes after being left alone with the officers.

"I am not guilty of the murder charged, Mr. Harkins," he said, recovering his bravado somewhat, "and you can't prove I am. We were at that woman's cabin, my friend, Otero, and I, I admit, but all I know about the death of that miner was his falling from the loft above. He was up there, and drunk. We left town that night so as not to be mixed up in a scandal.

"This arrest is an outrage, and will ruin my business," he added, turning to his safe again and taking out a fat pocketbook, "but you must do your

duty. And now "— beginning to count out bills — "I'll give each of you fifty thousand apiece to forget you found me. Is it a go?"

For one long moment Harkins' eyes, hard and scornful, were fixed on those of his prisoner, then he answered:

"You lie quite fluently, Curtis North," he said with incisive sneer. "You cringe like the mean coward you are. But a million of your stolen dollars won't tempt me to deprive the boys in Rawhide of what they are anticipating on your arrival!"

And then Curtis North collapsed again, as Harkins meant he should.

At just twelve, Stacy once more walked into the office of Curtis and Company to find Harkins smoking grimly and watching his two prisoners, while the leading one was instructing another broker how to continue and look after his business.

"Come, gentlemen, time's up, put these on," Harkins next commanded in brusque tone, producing a pair of handcuffs, and then at this final humiliation the last vestige of Curtis North's bravado vanished.

"There is no need of this indignity," he moaned, "and it's an outrage! I shall go along without trouble."

"I intend you will go along, anyhow," asserted

Harkins, curtly. "Come, right face!" And awed by this imperious marshal, the two cringing men submitted, and a quite suggestive procession of seven men entered the next downward-bound elevator. A crowd flocked about the Mills Building entrance awaiting them, for the news of this arrest had spread like wildfire, and shouts of "Here they come!" "How much am I bid for P. R. D. stock?" with rapid offers down in its price, greeted their appearance. Some were facetious bids, of course, most, real enough, for a good deal of this now worthless stock had been foisted upon "the street," and this was a last "devil-take-the-hindermost" scramble to get rid of it. The bidding ceased when one wag shouted, "A thousand P. R. D. for one cent a share," and another, "Send me your picture before they shave your whiskers," and thus insulted and jeered at by this band of scoffers who respect nothing under the sun, the two trembling prisoners were pushed and crowded into the waiting carriage.

"Here's my write-up of your two birds, Jim," Stacy said to him, now about to enter this conveyance. "Also the fob and picture you may need. If I am wanted at the trial I'll come on, good-bye."

And so ended the career of these two arch-conspirators in Wall Street — forgotten inside of a week. They left in state, however, for Curtis

North, forewarned as he had been by his own intuitions, carried with him over a quarter-million dollars in large bills and certified checks. He had also telephoned to engage an unscrupulous lawyer to go on to Rawhide with him and lead the legal fight he meant to make to save his neck. What happened there later, on his arrival, how "the b'ys," led by McCue, met him and received him, "in due and ancient" mining-camp manner, and its outcome, must be told later.

For the present, however, Stacy's plans and castle building, the city in his mind, his interest in Hazel and its up-hill course, are of more pertinent interest. It must be said, however, that this Colonel Sellers sort of fellow with his precious deed and key to unlock all his plans and harness the giant that was to build his city, now felt in a mood for joyous shouting. And Uncle Asa more so.

"What'll I do with my snakes?" that cheerful humorist queried of Stacy when they arrived at the depot to take the night train out of the city. "I didn't jist feel like givin' 'em to the weasel, he 'peared to hev 'bout troubles 'nuff. But somebody here ought to git 'em, I cal'late?"

Then Stacy glanced across the street to a brilliantly-lighted saloon, and an inspiration came.

"Go over to that gin palace," he responded, in-

dicating it, " and tell the head barkeeper that Curtis and Company, of Wall Street, sent the bag. Then skip out quick." And Uncle Asa did so.

He could only guess what the high-salaried artist in liquids said when he examined his present, but he laughed to himself for two hours about it, and Stacy kept him company.

CHAPTER XXXI

STACY was still in a hilarious mood the next morning when, after parting from Uncle Asa at the station, he reached his own office and found Colby, as usual, busy at his desk.

His first utterance upon entering was a shout of "Rah, rah, whoop, hip, hurrah, Bert! I've won out, hands down, and got the deed!"

"And a 'bun,' also, I should judge," returned Colby, facing around with a sarcastic grin. "Let's see your deed." And Stacy produced it.

"To Miss Hazel Webster, her heirs and assigns, to have and to hold, etc., etc.," Colby added now, reading from the document, then paused and regarded his partner with a broad grin.

"Little previous, wasn't it?" he drawled. "Or is this the winning maid's marriage settlement? If so, where do we come in on the power site?"

"Oh, I shall have it deeded back, of course," returned Stacy, briskly; "that's all right! No trouble about that!"

"In the family, eh?" queried Colby again with

quizzical smile. "And when does the wedding come off?

"But what's the use of questioning a man in love?" he continued ironically, without waiting an answer. "They can't even see a joke when it's lit up. Going to start for Oakdale this noon, are you? Want another check for five hundred, eh? Go ahead and have your pipe dream, my dear boy! We don't need business, and Barre can wait. When you get sane again, we will go ahead on the contract."

"I shall start for Oakdale to-morrow," returned Stacy seriously, for he was used to his partner's badinage, "and I want the two surveyors to go with me. I think, also, you'd better engage about fifty men, ready to come on when I say and begin work on the dam foundation. I presume I can get woodchoppers in Oakdale or Barre as soon as the swamp freezes up so they can work. My plan is to go ahead on the dam as fast as possible, cut and haul all available timber this winter, have a portable sawmill set up, and before green grass comes again I will have the foundation for the power house all laid. I think we'd better use wood for it, it's too far to haul brick from the railroad." And so the business needs of his plans now super-

seded all else in his mind — except Hazel, and she only to be considered as a side issue when evening came. To win her he meant, and he believed that he could do so; to go ahead now on his air castle and build his new city came first, however; and all the conspiring plans, land purchases, factory sites, the laying out of streets, the enlargement of a possible harbor, must needs be attended to at the same time. Pride, also, now came in as an incentive. He had suggested what he meant to do in Oakdale, knew that hamlet was all agog over his proposition, and that every man, woman, and child was soon to be discussing it and himself. And by nature a leader among men, he now meant to succeed and win public approval; also Hazel's.

He spent almost that entire day in discussing plans with Colby, made suitable provision for capital to be used in land purchase, had partnership papers drawn for Sam Gates and Uncle Asa to sign with himself, packed two trunks full of fall and winter clothing, for, as he assured his aunt at parting, he was to make his home in Oakdale for the next year, and then, with all plans perfected, he and the two surveyors left Albion at noon the next day.

He was quite happy, too, more so than ever before in his life, for now he was in a fair way to realize one of his air-castle dreams, to start an

embryo city where Nature had made possible a thriving one, with all the charm of wooded hills enclosing it, and the near-by ocean to add natural beauty and romance.

The money side of this dream was also a factor, though less so with him than success, and the satisfactory culmination of his plans. He meant to attain both, however.

There was something else, also, that came as a premonition, when he, just at sunset, once more rounded the hillside where he could look down into the valley at the apex of which lay Oakdale, and that — that here among these simple, frugal, honest people was likely to be his future home.

"For a time at least," he thought, glancing across to a scarlet blaze of foliage amidst which he knew stood the home of Hazel, then beyond to the bordering ocean. "It may be rather quiet here when winter comes, or until the trout brooks are unlocked, and the time comes to go shoring with Uncle Asa," he continued in thought, "still she will keep me from being very lonesome, I guess."

Who "she" was, can easily be inferred.

Sam, as might be expected, received him with enthusiasm.

"Uncle Asa said you might fetch in to-night," that Boniface asserted, while shaking Stacy's hand

cordially, "'n' I've got things waitin' to gin ye a good supper. I'll show ye all up to rooms," he added, seizing Stacy's suit-case and leading the way, "'n' arter supper we kin talk over matters. I s'pose ye're goin' to stay here now quite a spell?"

That Sam had "got things waitin'" was evinced in the dining-room, for the heretofore untidy Norah was attractive in clean white pinafore apron and cap, an immaculate table cloth and fan-folded napkins added attraction to the table, upon which was a vase of flowers, all adding zest to the broiled chicken and cold boiled lobster now served.

"I s'pose we'd best git arter this land bizness soon ez possible," Sam assured Stacy in an aside immediately after he emerged from the dining-room. "It's kinder whispered 'round here what yewr plans are 'bout the B'ar Hole site, 'n'— wal, you understand."

"I do," smiled Stacy, unconscious that his pact with Squire Phinney had been betrayed and the prospective deeding of that property to Hazel was known to all Oakdale. "We will get busy to-morrow, Sam, and begin buying land where it's advisable, or obtaining options on it." Then he donned his fall overcoat, lit a cigar, and started for Uncle Asa's at once.

"He's tendin' right out on Hazel," growled Sam to himself, going out to bring wood for the office fire, "'n' bizness kin wait. That's allus the way with a feller stuck on a gal. Wal, it's a cinch fer her, 'n' I'm glad on't."

Then he returned, added fuel to the fire, drew chairs up for the two surveyors, proffered them some "two-for-five" cigars, and proceeded in his adroit way to obtain all they could disclose of their mission.

In the meantime, and in spite of the pique resulting from his last meeting with Hazel, Stacy was striding on towards her home with anticipations of a pleasant evening. And soon hastening up the now leaf-carpeted lane, he once more heard her piano and voice now joined, and through the curtained window saw her seated at it, and near by in rapt attention, Mr. Arthur Penrose!

For one instant Stacy felt like gnashing his teeth and swearing, the next a glum of sulkiness (his one most objectionable foible) took possession of him.

"She knew, or must have known I was coming to-night," he muttered to himself, "for I told Uncle Asa I was, and now has that cigarette puppy for a caller! Well, so be it, Miss Hazel Iceberg! I'll stay away until you invite me to call."

And so wrathful was he at what he felt to be ill usage, that he came near wheeling about and returning to the hotel.

A second and better impulse came the next moment, and that was to ignore Hazel and her visitor, go on to the kitchen and make a business call on Uncle Asa. A knock on the door of that brought the ancient spinster, Aunt Sally, and he found Uncle Asa enjoying his corncob pipe beside the open fire.

"Wal, I'm glad to see ye, right glad, Mr. Whipple," was Uncle Asa's greeting, as he drew an armchair up for Stacy, while Aunt Sally discreetly withdrew. "I cal'lated you'd come to-night. Hazel hez a caller, but you 'n' I kin visit jist the same. He won't stay long, mebbe."

"I got here to-night, and came down right after supper mainly to have a business talk with you," rejoined Stacy, "so it's just as well. Business first with us, Uncle Asa. And now," he continued after lighting a cigar, "let's get at it. In the first place, and rather thoughtlessly on my part, before we went to New York, I had a deed ready for this Otero to sign and, as you saw, made out in your daughter's name. What I should have done was to have it in yours, but I was rather excited that morning and used hers, thinking it might be advisable for several reasons. Now I have the deed,

we or my firm must own that property, and what you and I must adjust is a fair price for us to pay you for it, then have Hazel deed it over to us, and we pay her the price, or you take it as you think best. It may be wiser," he added after a pause, "for the deed to be from her to you, then you to us to save comment here. I made Squire Phinney swear to secrecy in this matter, however, and I presume he has kept his word."

And just then Uncle Asa, so honest was he, came near blurting out the fact that this peculiar transaction was already known to all the village.

"Wal, mebbe it's best to hev the deed to me fust, 'n' made back to your firm," he responded after a pause. "It'll sorter look better, 'n' mebbe t'other way might make talk.

"Ez for the price"— smiling now —"thar won't be no price on it. You got me double what 'twas wuth out o' that swindler, 'n' the swamp's yewrn anyhow, now."

"But I can't accept it that way, and won't," returned Stacy firmly. "What I did in the matter was for two reasons: to get you your money out of the mine swindle, and pay Curtis North for trying to rob us, as he and Otero planned. The site is worth a fair price to us, and I shall insist on paying you for it."

"'N' ye can't, 'n' I won't take a dern cent," responded Uncle Asa as firmly, and smiling, "so thar ye be."

For a long five minutes Stacy mused upon this unique situation fully conscious that Uncle Asa meant what he said. Also that he himself was equally firm in not being willing to accept this valuable piece of property without due payment.

"I feel just as I said, Uncle Asa," he asserted at last, "and so will my partner. We must have that site, and we won't accept it as a gift from you, so what's to be done?"

"Derned if I know," rejoined Uncle Asa chuckling. "I'm jist ez anxious ez yew be to hev ye go ahead 'n' build yer dam; but I won't do a mean thing, 'n' takin' pay fer what I've got double its wuth fer a'ready 'ud make me feel I wus!"

"But we must fix it somehow, you and I."

"Yes, we must, I'll 'low, 'n' now yew crack the nut, ye know my feelin's!"

For another long moment Stacy gave thought to this unusual and complex situation. He also felt that he personally would like Hazel to have five thousand dollars more — what he considered fair valuation for this swamp — to add to her bank account.

"I see but one way out of it," he declared finally,

" or rather two ways. First, that we go to Albion and I will pick three business men who don't know us, state the situation and our positions, and abide by their decision; or I will give you five thousand dollars to deposit in a Barre bank in Hazel's name, and if within one year she is not my promised wife you are to then give her the bank book. In the meantime, you must promise me on your honor, not to betray this agreement to her. On these conditions I'll accept the deed and go ahead with my plans."

" Wal, that way out on't is sorter like a jug — handle all on one side," chuckled Uncle Asa; " she gits the money anyhow, fur's I kin see? "

" And I get her or lose the money," returned Stacy promptly. " So it's a fair bargain, or up to me to win her, isn't it? Come, Uncle Asa, let's call it a go. I want her if I can get her, even for a thousand times that sum! "

" Wal, I'll call it a go," responded Uncle Asa smiling and offering his hand, " 'n'— wal, ye know how I feel in the matter." Then he bent forward, picked a coal out of the fire with the tongs, lit his pipe, and puffed away contentedly, as if he once more heard larks singing in the sky. From his viewpoint, there were no more clouds in it.

And then, while Stacy mused upon the complica-

tion and wondered how the elusive Hazel would act and feel when informed that he had had this deed drawn in her name and she was actually the owner of this now valuable swamp, Uncle Asa began laughing; first, a low ripple, then louder, until it swelled into a "ha-ha-ha" that shook him. "Say, Stacy," he ejaculated, curbing it a little, "I've cut up some didoes in my time, but never one I laughed at arterwards like the minute I saw that nig turn a flip-flop ez that snake slid out o' the shoe! 'N' say," he continued after another burst of laughter, "do ye know I'd gin a fiver to 'a' seen that barkeep open the present he got from Curtis 'n' Company! I would right now! I only wisht the snakes'd ben loose in the telescope so they'd 'a' slid out. Wouldn't that 'a' joggled him some?"

"Rather," returned Stacy, now laughing; "he'd certainly have thought he had 'em himself!

"And now," he continued, after quieting down and consulting his watch, "there are a few business matters I'd like you to attend to. First, I want you to see Squire Phinney in the morning and have this deed recorded and one made out to yourself, then copy of same to Bemis, Colby and Company, and all recorded in proper order. Then meet me at the hotel at noon for dinner, and you and Sam

sign our partnership papers; also discuss what land we had better buy or obtain options on at once. My idea is that we want all below your farm and perhaps an eighth of a mile back from the creek bottom lands down to its mouth, and a section across where your table is and where we camped. That is worthless sand now. When that harbor is made available for coasters it will be worth thousands. This land below us, now covered with scrub, and sandy, is not of much value, either, at present. But it's along this side and towards the ocean that shops and tenement houses will first be built." And then on wings again, he launched into more explicit descriptions of his plans and present intentions.

"I want you and Sam to manage this investment matter," he declared as a finale, "and consult with me when needed. I've got two surveyors here now. In a few days, or as soon as we can house and feed them, I shall have fifty men at work on the dam foundation; also as many more clearing up the swamp when freezing weather comes. I think I'd better go now," he added, consulting his watch again and rising. Then and despite all Uncle Asa's urging and assertion that "Hazel's company 'll be goin' soon," Stacy hurried away.

The fact was that he did not want to stay and

meet that piquant lady this evening, but wished rather that she should know he had come and gone without attempting to see her. Despite all his heart-to-heart exchange with her father, Stacy still felt that she ought to have informed this Penrose fellow that a caller was expected this evening, and so been ready to see him.

Like some other men in this world, Stacy was inclined to feel himself the largest "pebble on the beach."

Uncle Asa, however, felt that he, as he would put it, "had got to cut a cat's claws," and it was no easy task to accomplish. He knew Hazel's spirit, knew how she felt about this deed matter — now common gossip, and that some unpleasant things would be said by her when this matter came up. Beyond that, and while he didn't blame Stacy, since he meant no harm, he felt that it was a thoughtless act of his to have this deed drawn in her name. And he also very much desired to bring about amiable relations between Hazel and Stacy with the hope that it might mature into something more. Not that he was a matchmaker or anxious to dispose of Hazel, only — broad-minded and keen as he was — he saw the best that was in Stacy, and that below his surface nature, or a disposition to be masterful and overconfident, lay the

better attributes of honor, honesty, and generosity.

"The fur'll fly, I s'pose," he said to himself, now freshening the fire, and still thinking of this task after Stacy had been gone a half hour, "'n' dern that Penrose feller, anyway! Why don't he know 'nuff to go home when it's time? He's sartinly a stayer!"

Then he filled his pipe again and puffed away in glum silence for almost an hour, or until the kitchen clock chimed eleven, and Hazel's caller departed.

"Wal, he's gone finally, hez he?" he queried as Hazel now entered the kitchen, and without a smile. "Good deal like a burdock burr, wa'n't he, girlie?"

"Yes, father," she answered dutifully, "and an awful bore, too. But I couldn't tell him to go, you see? It was Mr. Whipple that called, wasn't it? I recognized his voice."

"Yes, jist to talk business a few minutes, he didn't stay long, bein' ez yew had company, I cal'late," returned her father, then paused, watching her still standing beside the chair Stacy had occupied. "Sit down, girlie," he added the next moment. "I've got suthin' to talk over with ye.

"It's this," he added, as she obeyed, "'n' I want ye to take it cool, 'n' ez things are, to please me. Now, Mr. Whipple's all right 'n' I like him, ez ye know. But he's had a good deal on his mind lately,

gittin' ready to tackle them two sharpers we scooped 'n' started towards a jail, anyhow, 'n' when he had that deed filled out in yewr name he didn't stop to think it might leak out 'n' do harm by shamin' ye, if it did."

"Did he say so?" interrupted Hazel, anxiously.

"He did, sartinly, but he don't know yew know it, or anybody but the Squire 'n' I, 'n' he made the Squire swear he wouldn't tell. 'N' I don't think he'd best be told ye know it, 'n' feel hurt," he added after a pause; "'twould make him feel 'shamed, too, 'n' won't help matters."

"But why didn't he think first and not use my name and get me talked about?" returned Hazel with rising anger. "It's such an unusual thing that everybody is saying he expects I will marry him anyhow, and glad of the chance! He has done an almost insulting thing, and the more I think about it, the madder I get!"

"Fergit it then," returned her father with a light laugh, "'n' think how much wuss he might 'a' done! He might 'a' tried to skin me outen the land 'stead o' insistin' on givin' me five thousand fer it ez he did this evenin'. Ez fer the talk, Hazel"—consolingly—"thar ain't a gal here but what 'ud be tickled to pieces to hev a nice feller like him fall over himself to make her sich a present ez that.

Ez fer him 'spectin' you to marry him "— smiling now —" o' course he does if he kin coax ye to. But that ain't no insult, either.

" 'N' now to git to business," he continued soberly, " he wants you to deed this land over to me fer the looks on't, I'm to deed it over to his firm, 'n' that's the end o' the transaction."

" I am glad he had even so much consideration for public opinion," Hazel responded less tartly, " but he mustn't think he owns me or can buy me, for he never can! "

" O' course not, course not, no sich idee on his part, girlie," asserted Uncle Asa in his most soothing tone, " leastwise not in the way you mean. 'N' yet he does mean to buy ye with his name, his feelin's, 'n' all he's got in the world, if he kin. 'N' ye orter feel proud ye're wuth all that to him." And Hazel, thus consoled by her tactful father, bade him good night and left the kitchen.

" It'll all work out 'bout ez it allus does," he mused after she had gone. " Some scrappin' 'n' naggin' to begin, some makin'-up 'n' runnin' away to make him chase her, 'n' he doin' it, till courtin' days are over 'n' both sorry, same ez I was.

" But I wish that Penrose feller 'ud hike back to Barre. He hain't no show with Hazel, 'n' he's only in the way, now."

CHAPTER XXXII

UNCLE ASA'S measure of Stacy and his disposition to sulk if hurt was correct, for he did not call upon Hazel again for three weeks, and did not even see her except in church the following Sunday, and then hurried away after service to avoid meeting her. The facts were that he was entirely unconscious how mortified she had felt over the gossip regarding his use of her name in the deed he had had drawn, and ascribed her coolness and avoidance of him during the camping-out episode as an occult desire to impress him with the fact that his society was not especially desired by her.

"She distrusted me from the start," he assured himself again and again while nursing this fit of sulks; "she was half sorry for so doing when convinced I wasn't the robber she imagined, and was nice and sweet to me when we started on the camping-out trip. Then, for fear I should presume upon it, or woman-like, not willing to own up she was wrong — presto, she got chilly again! Then, still further to impress me with her total indiffer-

ence, she invites this Barre dude to call the evening I am expected!

"It will be quite a long time before I try to see you again, Miss Iceberg!"

In a way, too, Stacy was justified in feeling as he did, for while the desire to get square with a disreputable pair of swindlers for trying to play a sharp game of extortion on him had been one reason for his counterplotting, beyond that was the broader and nobler one of wishing to aid that good old Samaritan, Uncle Asa, and restore Hazel's heritage. He had spent hundreds of dollars in this quest, and much valuable time. He had almost exasperated his partner for so much delay of their business obligations, and now felt that the girl he had shown his admiration for in so many ways, and done so much to aid, might at least have been ready to receive and entertain him the first evening of his return to Oakdale. And he had assured Uncle Asa that he should call then!

But Stacy, while sore at heart from Hazel's treatment, was not one to show it or let it interfere with business in any manner. He met Uncle Asa the next morning as cordially as ever, and soon as both deeds were properly executed and recorded, gave him a check for five thousand dollars as nonchalantly as though for five cents, then after again

requesting Squire Phinney to keep silent regarding the use of Hazel's name, invited Uncle Asa over to the hotel to join with Sam in the signing of their partnership papers, and in a subsequent discussion of how much and what land to buy. He then joined the two surveyors in their work of mapping out the reservoir area, location of dam, and where to obtain stone for it, hired a few men and set them building barracks and cooking and dining-room adjacent to the selected site, and large enough to take care of the hundred or more men soon to be at work. He consulted with Bascom, and gave him orders for bedding, and a cooking outfit for these, also for supplies; had a small shanty built for his own office near the camp, and as Bascom's store contained the only telephone connecting Oakdale with Barre, he ordered a branch line joining this with his office and hotel. With so much accomplished towards the contract on hand, he visited Barre, hired about half the force of woodchoppers and stone masons needed, and set them at work. About fifty more came up later from Albion, and within two weeks, Sam was saying to the Old Guard "Things air hummin' now roundabout old B'ar Hole Swamp, 'n' suthin' doin' fer sartin.

"He's a hustler, that Whipple feller, he is," Sam added admiringly, "'n' if I'd any idee o' what was

in his nut the day he lit here last June, I wouldn't 'a' sprung that hell-hole on him ez I did. But he don't lay it up agin me, jist took it ez 'twas meant, 'n' I respect him fer it! He's all right, 'n' all wool, he is, 'n' goin' to be the makin' o' this 'ere town.

"We're pards, too, in some buildin' plans in the futur," he admitted with satisfied smile at the group now enjoying the October afternoon sunshine with him on the hotel piazza, "me 'n' Uncle Asa. 'N' some day this town'll wake up 'n' won't know what's hit 'em, they won't! Thar'll be trolley keers up to the depot, 'lectric lights a-goin' nights all over the town, ships'll be anchorin' in the mouth o' the crick, 'n' I wouldn't be s'prised if we built this hotel bigger, jist to 'commodate city folks comin' summers, ez they will."

"'N' look at the money he's puttin' out now," interrupted Bascom with satisfaction, "'n' most on't through me. He ain't no skinflint, he ain't. Jist come to me 'n' ordered everything he wanted offhand 'thout drivin' any sort o' bargain. 'Bascom,' he says, beginnin' to write 'em down, 'here's a list o' things I want ye to git, 'n' make the price right fer spot cash down, 'n' ye git it!' I did, too, a check the next day arter I gin him a bill fer the fittin's o' his shacks. He's good pay, anyhow, 'n'

that's what I like best in any man," he continued gratefully; "no hangin' ye up, 'n' keepin' ye waitin' fer pay till the 'count gits moss on't!"

"I s'pose I might git a job bossin' some o' the men over to the dam," drawled Lem Atwater, now catching some of this new enthusiasm. "I'd be willin' if he wanted me. Guess I'll ask him."

"Yaas, you'd be willin' to do bossin', I'll bet," rejoined Sam in the same drawl. "But ye'll never do any work if ye kin duck it, Lem. Work 'n' yew never was good friends."

While Oakdale was now all agog over Stacy's plans and doings, and rife with gossip concerning their outcome, its daily life was continuing in the same even tenor as usual. Each day Uncle Levi made his two trips to the depot and return, conveying one small mail pouch and an occasional drummer. Nearly every other day Uncle Asa pulled down the creek to draw his pots, and that evening drove up to the village with his catch of lobsters, leaving most of them at the hotel. Occasionally, from fatherly interest in Stacy's appetite, a basket of clams was added to this contribution. Hazel, also, in spite of her father's protest, had opened school again, and each morning and evening now trudged back and forth over the mile-and-a-half journey thus made obligatory, and when Sun-

day came was as usual occupying her position in the choir. And her exquisite voice drew more attendants than Parson Upson's ultra orthodox arguments!

Gossip was also rife concerning Stacy's interest in her and its probable result, for his gifts, suggestive attentions, and use of her name in the deed pointed to but one conclusion. In the meantime, Stacy, entirely unconscious of how she felt about this matter, and of the persistent gossip, was so busy — in fact so overwhelmed with care and responsibility, that he scarce knew what day of the week it was.

Each morn, long before Hazel came up through the village schoolward bound, he left the hotel, ate dinner with his men to save time, and returned when sunset came, so naturally never met her. He still nursed his pique, however, and while he often glanced down towards Maple Dell longingly in going or returning from his office near the camp, and had almost to grit his teeth when evening came to keep himself from calling on her again unbidden, his fit of sulks and "stick-it-out" nature prevailed over his heart hunger. His journey over the hills and along a new-made road to the dam site also brought him to a point where he could look down upon and reconnoiter her home, and here when

alone, he invariably halted to do so, and see if perchance she was visible. He did see her once, thus watching, but at such a distance that he was sure she did not recognize him. The sight of her brought an unexpected thrill and consciousness that he was, after all, playing a fool's part, and gnawing a file. He also almost desired to curse himself for being unable to put her out of his mind and feelings.

"It's a part of the illusion, I suppose," he asserted to himself, philosophically, now striding on, "and what a consummate fool that will make of a man!"

Uncle Asa, however, wise beyond either of these two actors in the real drama of life, saw that something was amiss in his pet project, and was pained accordingly. He had attended to his part, made deposit of the five thousand dollars in Hazel's name, and with Sam, as bargain maker, had either bought or obtained options on all land of which Stacy had advised the purchase. He had also located where roads could best be cut through the swamp-bordering woods, shown Stacy where a spring could be tapped by a pipe and supply the best of water to his camp, and helped the surveyors in many ways. All the preliminary details of Stacy's dam and city-building plans were develop-

ing in due order, but the most important — the inner one that was to bind Stacy's interest here — was apparently failing to materialize. Uncle Asa was too wise and tactful even to hint this to Stacy or Hazel, yet the fact that Stacy had not called at his home since the first night after his arrival for good, nor his name been mentioned by Hazel, seemed ominous. The coast was all clear now. Penrose, whom Uncle Asa had much despised, had returned to Barre, and Hazel, as if she, too, were piqued about something, either read in glum silence each long evening, or hied herself away to call on one of her girl friends. It wasn't right, according to her father's ideas and hopes, yet such were the facts. He also tried a diplomatic suggestion one day, but it failed of its object.

"It's gittin' late in the season," he said to Stacy that day when he, as usual, made his visit to the camp to see how work was progressing, "'n' we won't hev many more days warm 'nuff to go shorin' agin this fall, I s'pose. I'd like to hev yew 'n' I go once more, howsomever," he continued, glancing furtively at Stacy, who now looked up from his desk as he spoke, "jist yew 'n' I 'n' Hazel some Saturday when she's out o' school. How'd that strike ye, Mr. Whipple? Ye've ben workin' stiddy now fer 'most three weeks, 'n' a day off'll

do ye good, mebbe? What do ye say to the idee?"

"I'll do it gladly," returned Stacy smiling, fully conscious of what was in Uncle Asa's mind. "In fact I would enjoy another day at the shore very much. I doubt if Miss Hazel would care to join us, however, unless her girl friends were asked. You can find out, though, and let me know. I am at your service any day you say."

To have three girls along and a repetition of what he imagined had caused Stacy's fit of sulks on the previous outing, was not what Uncle Asa wanted, however, so he let the matter drop.

"It's a mix-up all 'round," he asserted to himself soon after, homeward bound, "a sorter tangle I can't unravel. Hazel's sore over his usin' her name on the deed, 'n' he's sulky 'count o' the way she sent him off with the Oakes gal. On top o' this crisscross is that Penrose feller's cuttin' him out that evenin' he called, 'n' thar ye be! Mebbe luck or the Lord'll pervide a way out o' the tangle, but I can't see one! Handlin' a couple o' balky lovers is wuss'n breakin' in a pair o' steers!"

Luck, however, did play a part in this complication, and speedily, too, for the very next afternoon Stacy returning to the village two hours earlier than usual to see Bascom about some supplies, had just reached the main road when he met the elusive

Hazel, homeward bound from her school. She smiled and bowed with her invariable dignity, he raised his hat, smiling, also, then halted suddenly as she came up.

"How do you do, Miss Webster," he said, speaking first in cool tone, "and how have you been since our camping-out party?"

"Nicely, thank you," she returned in the same tone. "And how have you been? Very busy, from what I hear?"

"Yes," he rejoined, smiling again, "so busy I've lost all count of time these days. Let me see, is it two weeks or a month since I was down to call on your father and didn't see you?"

"I really couldn't say," she answered in the same nonchalant tone. "Time passes quickly to me now that I am teaching school again. I think I saw you at church last Sunday, didn't I? Or was it two weeks ago?"

"Two I should guess," he returned with furtive glance into her impassive face, and then a halt came to this cool and polite exchange; also an instantaneous conviction in Stacy's mind that neither by word nor glance even would this icy maid allow him to infer that she cared one iota whether she ever saw him again or not. And almost also, did Stacy's pique and pride win over his heart-hunger,

and cause him to make a polite leave-taking and turn away.

For one long moment, a crucial one in the heart-history of these two, Love and Pride hung at even balance in Stacy's mind, then Love won.

"I was sorry not to see you the other evening," he next said in more cordial tone. "I rather expected to."

"So was I," smiling slightly again, "but I had an unexpected caller and you left before he did. You might try again?" she added piquantly. "I am usually at home evenings."

"And find another caller monopolizing your company?"

"Possibly, though not probably. I have few friends here, and those from Barre have gone home." Then, as if this were all the encouragement she would give him, she took one step onward, then halted.

"Well, I will try again," responded Stacy with more eagerness. "Perhaps this evening. Shall you be at home?"

"I expect to be," she returned, and with a "Thank you, then I shall call," from Stacy, he raised his hat, bowed, and turned away.

"Pretty cool, but she's worth knuckling to," he muttered when well away from this fascinating

maid. "And proud? Ye gods, but that's no name for it!" And then recalling her implied invitation to call, somehow a keen thrill of satisfaction came with it, and forgetfulness that he was still walking upon the earth.

And something of the same buoyancy of heart gave Hazel's homeward footsteps a new resiliency!

CHAPTER XXXIII

IN spite of Hazel's first pique and vexation over Stacy's use of her name in the deed, and the consequent gossip, what her father had said and her own good sense had — during this three week's interim — softened the poignant barb, so to speak, and healed the wound. Pride, also, was a factor, for his not calling again for so long was not flattering in the face of her girl friends' opinions of his eligibility, so freely expressed; and beyond that, what he had actually done for her father gradually appealed to her most of all. The one other sore spot in her feelings — the idea that he felt he could buy her — was also healing. Then again, like leaven in the mixture of many emotions, there were her own feelings. She was not in love with him as yet, felt positive her sole duty in life was devotion to her father, she loved her own freedom and meant to retain it; and yet, despite all this, Stacy's bold, assertive ways, his well-proved business sagacity and lofty sense of honor, and more especially his devotion to her father's interests,

all known to her, were factors that kept his face in her mind at all times.

" He is a man among men in spite of his sulkiness and imperious ways," her heart kept saying, and when he capitulated, so to speak, that crucial moment on the highway, a sudden consciousness of her own power and worth and what it meant to him, brought a keen thrill of satisfaction. It is also needless to say that when he presented himself at the throne of her gracious consideration that evening, she was garbed in her most becoming evening gown, vases filled with bunches of scarlet and yellow leaves graced the parlor, and a cheerful fire added its welcoming charm. And best of all, Hazel herself, who with cheeks reflecting a faint touch of the glowing flames and eyes unusually tender, made the supreme and crowning feature of this homelike room.

It is said that men marry with their eyes and women with their ears, and something of the same motive force now gave a bias to Stacy's feelings. For three weeks he had been starving himself for Hazel's face through pique. Each day about the only ones he had seen (excluding Norah's) had been the scores of coarse, hard-featured, or swarthy ones of his workmen; and evenings, the brown, wrinkled,

seldom-shaven faces of Sam and the Old Guard, or that of Uncle Asa. So that now to have the piquant, exquisitely-tinted and animated one of Hazel's smiling at him, seemed like a gift from the gods!

And very grateful was he for it.

"Your fire recalls our evening at the shore," he said, after she had installed him in an easy chair one side of it and herself opposite, "and all the romance of it, also. I have lived that evening over again many times since, and always hear the low wave-wash when I do, and your banjo as well."

"Living over pleasant hours and experiences is the best part of them, I think," she returned dreamily, as if now recalling this one. "Much depends upon one's moods, however, at the time. That is, whether we are in a receptive one or not."

"You believe in moods then?"

"Why, yes, how can one help it? It's like a sense of obligation that forces itself upon you and, as Emerson says, 'Life is but a succession of moods, varying ever like those of a kaleidoscope.' Mine are, anyway, and what I say and do in one, I am apt to repent of in another."

"That recalls Sam and his observation about his mine certificate," rejoined Stacy with a smile.

"He has it framed to keep and prove how many kinds of fool a man can be and live, he says."

"So I have heard," responded Hazel, also smiling. "Not much happens here without all Oakdale hearing of it."

"My comings and goings and all about my plans, also, I presume," queried Stacy, seeing a faint light.

"Of course, and to a greater extent than you imagine, I presume"— glancing curiously at him. "To live here is like dwelling in a glass house that keeps no secrets."

"Not even those promised to be kept inviolate on honor?" questioned Stacy, seeing more light.

"Very few," flushing and looking down; "and worse than that, what we don't say and do, but might or might not, is also discussed."

For one long moment Stacy stared at the fire while this suave admission with its occult insinuation was digested, then a sudden impulse to admit his own mistakes came.

"Miss Webster," he said earnestly, "you have opened my eyes to a situation here I wasn't aware of, and I am sorry for what I now see was an unwise act on my part, though meaning no harm, and quite thoughtless. Did you hear that I had a deed of Bear Hole Swamp drawn in your name before I

took your father to New York? I mean before he asked you to sign another one over to my firm?"

"I did," she answered, flushing again. "I was told of it the morning we started on our camping-out trip."

Then Stacy gave a low and prolonged whistle, for now the origin of all his vexation was made clear.

"So much for trusting a man's word of honor," he next said with sarcastic inflection, "or believing he can keep a secret. I feel like cowhiding Squire Phinney." And without waiting for any response from Hazel he hurriedly gave her an accurate account of his reasons for using her name in the deed.

"I dared not take the chance and go to this Curtis North with my name or your father's in the deed," he added in conclusion, "for my act was, after all, a game of extortion. This swindler had actually bought and paid full price for the land, you see, and the next best plan was to use yours, because I knew you would transfer the property back to us if your father said so. My action, and I was forced to it," he added regretfully, "has cost you a great deal of humiliation, I am sure, by being gossiped about, and me three weeks of lonesome evenings when I wanted to be down here calling on you."

Then Hazel grew rose-red, for this was almost a confession of love.

"I am sorry for the last part," she admitted naïvely; "the other I don't care about now. It did hurt me at first, however, for I did not understand it. I've grown used to the gossiping tongues now, and don't care about them," she added hastily, "so long as my own conscience is clear." She paused with downcast eyes. One instant only, while Stacy watched her admiringly, then looked up. "I, too, am sorry for something," she next asserted, "and that is my own neglect in thanking you for all you have done for father. It has lifted a load from his heart and made him ten years younger. I should have done so that day at the shore. I do so now and from the bottom of my heart."

"Forget it, please," rejoined Stacy briskly, "for I am still in your debt for having so mortified you. Also, let me assure you that I, too, feel that your father is worth doing a good turn for any time. I haven't forgotten how nice he was to me when I came here, or the glorious shortcake you prepared for us that day," he added, as if wishing to dismiss the more serious matter. "I only hope I shall be here when strawberries come again, and get another. I presume I shall, for we have quite a contract on hand."

"So I understand," with sudden interest, "for father keeps me informed about your doings. I'd

like to come up and see your building operations some Saturday. May I?"

"Most certainly, delighted to have you," with eagerness. "Come any time and bring all your girl friends." And then, as might be expected, he launched into a description of his work and how it was carried on. "I hope to have the dam up by spring," he explained in conclusion, "and the swamp cleared by then, or at least all available timber hauled out, and the brush ready to burn. When the dam is done and we are ready to close the gates, I shall have my partner and my good aunt, who adopted me years ago, come up; also invite everybody here to help celebrate that event. Give them a feast.

"A clambake, perhaps," he added after a moment's thought. "That wouldn't be a bad idea, would it, with your father as its master spirit?

"And now to change the subject," he continued, after this had been fully discussed, and smiling, "you have listened patiently to all my prosy disquisition on dam building, let me do some listening while you favor me. You can guess how," and he nodded towards the piano.

"With pleasure," smiling at his original way of asking. "Which shall it be — piano, harp, or banjo?"

"The harp first so I can go back to the first time I saw you, and a few songs later. My three weeks' penance for my sins and Sam's company evenings has made me music-hungry — starved, in fact."

"So I judge by your modest request," she retorted smiling; "but if you feel you have been properly punished for your unsocial conduct, you shall be rewarded."

And reward him she did, without urging and with an hour-long medley of her choicest musical gems. She then brought in a tray of light refreshments, urged him to enjoy a cigar after that, freshened the fire, and drew her own chair up for further converse, and so the evening passed.

And a delightful one it was to Stacy, now more in love than ever with this daintily beautiful, tactful, and charming little lady who had the rare art of inspiring his best thoughts, and being an appreciative listener as well. She really did mean to be entertaining, also, not from any desire to ensnare — that was beneath her — but from a gracious wish to show her appreciation of what he had done for her father. Also, and beyond that, to make amends for her own previous distrust and coolness. He noticed, too, that she wore the beautiful slippers he had sent her; the books of his selection were all conspicuous upon the parlor table; and more flat-

tering even than those evidences of her occult tact, was the persistency with which she kept him talking about his own plans and city-building intentions.

And if there is any one thing more flattering to a man than another (and most men hunger for it), it is to keep him talking about himself! And the sweetest flattery of all, is to have a charming lady do it!

"I have had a most delightful evening, Miss Webster," he assured her at parting; "how much so you can't realize unless you know the scope and ancient story-telling proclivities of Sam's retinue, which I've had to endure now for three weeks. I trust I may impose upon your charity again, and often?"

"I shall be pleased to see you any evening," she responded, smiling archly; "and if I have callers and your courage fails, you can take refuge behind the grindstone again. I hope it will not, however."

And once more as he now strode down the leaf-carpeted lane, the light pressure of her little hand at parting was with him, the rustling of the brown leaves beneath his feet was like the tinkle of tiny bells, and a wondrous, newborn buoyancy of feeling, made the star-lit night seem glorious.

"I am in for it, and no escape now," he said, measuring his own feelings philosophically, and

fully conscious of what this elation meant. "It's either yes or no, heaven or the other place for me, that's certain! But bless her sweet soul, she's worth it, ten times over!"

When he reached the hotel his only welcome was one small lamp left burning for him, but by it he despatched a rather laconic missive.

"DEAR BERT," he wrote. "Send me three dozen American Beauty roses by express, and have them here by Saturday, sure. Yours ever, STACY."

Then, in order that his letter would go out on the morning mail, he hastened over to Bascom's store to post it.

He received an answer by due return of mail, and said reply must also be quoted.

"Order for flowers received and shipped to-day. Bill for fifteen dollars enclosed," his partner wrote, "and may you be happy ever after. I am sure you are in Oakdale. Also the girl. I assume you are attending to our business part of the time, but that is only a guess. When is the wedding? Yours, BERT."

CHAPTER XXXIV

MOODS dominate the action of a man in love more than at any other period of his existence, and so it was with Stacy. He had felt himself ill-used by Hazel and nursed his pique for three weeks, suffering accordingly, and then when her adroit hint of her own feelings and cordial reception had effectually obliterated his sense of injury, he felt in a mood to rush headlong into a proposal of marriage. His good sense, and the consciousness that Hazel could not be won lightly still ruled him, however; he also felt that he had better go slowly in the matter, and pay court to her for a few months before risking the all-important question.

"One robin doesn't bring spring, or one smile mean a woman is won," he said to himself the next morning on his way over to the camp and halting to reconnoiter Hazel's home once more, "and I'd better be cautious and not slop over with you, my sweet Iceberg! She is keen enough to understand the drift of every word or act of mine," he added, now striding on. "She will know, or knows al-

ready, that I mean to win her if I can, and for the rest, when she feels ready to say 'yes,' she will give me an adroit hint of it."

In this latter conclusion, however, he was mistaken, as many a man has been before. In business matters, Stacy, as may be inferred, was methodical, and invariably laid his plans far ahead of their possible consummation, as he had in this city-building air castle of his. Naturally, also, he now went about his plots and plans of love-making in the same manner.

"I mustn't bore her," he said to himself again and returning to the subject now uppermost in his mind after he had made the rounds of his gangs of men at work that morning. "Her isolated life with her books and music has made her self-contained and analytical. There is no society here, so she doesn't need an escort. Her school furnishes her diversion enough, so if I win her at all, it must be by so appealing to her mind that she will come to need my company, and for that I've got to keep my wits awake, polished, and with an edge on all the time."

And in this conclusion he was quite right!

While Stacy was now sure to be building the air castle of love, the more practical one of his dam and reservoir still intruded, and must intrude for

months to come. He had by this time about fifty men at work digging, quarrying and squaring stone, and hauling it to the dam site. Also as many more felling the trees bordering the two-mile long by one-quarter wide area of Bear Hole Swamp, or cutting and piling the brush in the morass part of it, ready for a grand conflagration when spring came again. A cook and "cookee," or assistant, were kept very busy feeding these, they must be detailed in gangs with sub-bosses to direct operations, and what with supplies to be kept coming, the general plan of all work to be directed by Stacy, order preserved, and details looked after, he was busy from morning until night. In a way, also, his operations, and the rude barracks with their cook-room and dining-room amid the pines below the dam site, much resembled a lumber camp in the woods. It was out of sight or sound of the village, the grand old trees filling the gorge below the site chosen between two abutting hills, and the leaping, brawling stream, added romance to the seclusion. Uncle Asa, with a fatherly interest in Stacy and the all-important operations, usually paid the camp a daily visit, and when he came again, on the afternoon after Stacy had made his peace with Hazel, so to speak, that young man was more anxious to go shoring again than previously.

"I've thought over your suggestion to make another trip to the shore, Uncle Asa," he said to him, coming to the point at once, "and as to-morrow is Saturday and Miss Hazel free from school, if she is willing and you say the word, I am with you."

"Wal, that suits me," was the smiling rejoinder, "'n' I'll tell Hazel she's wanted by both on us. I don't cal'late we need the other gals, do we?"

"No, decidedly not," returned Stacy, noticing the amused twinkle in Uncle Asa's eyes; "just we three and a warm day is enough."

"Wal, I guess we'll git it," responded that weather-wise man, squinting at the lowering sun, "'n' I'm powerful glad yew'll git away.

"I allus sorter want to hang onto the warm fall days," he added with a shade of pathos, "'n' make the most on 'em. They don't last long. I dread winters more 'n' more, 'n' thar ye be."

And so it came to pass the next day that these three good friends with plenty of wraps, basket of table accessories, and good spirits galore, once more followed the ebb tide's outflow down the winding creek.

"I'll pull my pots," said Uncle Asa after landing, "'n' yew two must keep house till I'm back." And thus exhorted to become domestic, Hazel and Stacy were left to their own fate.

And both were very willing!

"Why is it," queried Stacy after the table had been made ready and driftwood for fire duly gathered, "that cooking and eating away in the woods or beside the shore is attractive to so many people?"

"Just the romance of it, I presume," smiled Hazel, "or to escape the trammels of home life. To be able to eat like a savage and throw clam shells on the ground as we do here. What is your theory?"

"Inherited instinct, I am inclined to think," returned Stacy, glancing up the long stretch of wave-washed shore, "and the habits of our primal ancestors. They lived a savage life. To obtain, cook, and eat food was their principal and most enjoyable occupation, so we, inheriting that impulse and pleasure, obtain an unusual satisfaction by imitating their way of living. I find myself envying my men in their crude life in the Bear Hole gorge, sitting around camp fires under the pines each evening as they do. As I recall them, the pleasantest days of my life have been those spent camping in some wilderness."

"You are much like father in that respect," Hazel answered, smiling at Stacy's animated face. "The most enjoyed of all his days have been spent

here, and he has always brought me, if possible, since I was a little tot."

"This is a sort of trysting spot for you two, then, and why he brought us all here for the camping-out party, I guess."

"Of course, and it makes him like a boy again, for which I am more than thankful."

"And my coming and plans are to spoil this spot for him," continued Stacy regretfully, glancing around its isolated condition. And it was very much so, for the scattered houses of Oakdale four miles up the opening valley and Uncle Asa's fish-house and little wharf inside the sand spit were all the visible signs of human handiwork, while to right and left lay the in-and-out curving, wave-washed beach, far as the eye could see. Not a house or solitary human being was in sight along this lonely shore with jagged and serrated bulwarks of sedge-topped sand forming the inner coast line. Back of this lay a growth of low scrub rising to the wooded hills and just now ablaze with autumn color, and thousands of barberry bushes vividly red from ripened berries.

"I don't wonder your father loves this spot, Miss Webster," Stacy asserted again after his prolonged look around and up and down the white, glistening

beach with here and there a flock of gulls circling over it or alighting upon a point of sand, "for here one can forget the world and feel that he is by the world forgot.

"How does it affect you, Miss Hazel?" he queried after a pause, and venturing so to address her. "Pardon my freedom, but I'd like to drop formality and use your given name now. May I?"

"You may call me Hazel here or at home," she responded naïvely and with a dreamy glance at the yeasty wave-wash not two rods from where they sat. "I, too, dislike formal addresses."

And just then Stacy, glancing at her half-averted face, rose-tinted by the sea wind and crowned by a mobcap of scarlet, below which a few locks were astray, felt a new sense of proprietorship, and that he had won a long step towards her confidence and possible love.

"You must excuse my preoccupation," she averred suddenly, turning toward him after a long pause; "what were you asking a moment ago?"

"Why, how this lone and lonely shore affects you. How does it?"

"As you see"— smiling —"puts me in a trance, a dream, and makes me forget my friends, my school, everything, and everybody, as I have now. This spot and mood has been mine many times be-

fore," she added with more animation. "It's been my playmate, as it were, since a child. Then I used to help father dig clams or sit in the bow of his boat and watch him pull pots out on the tossing billows. Now I have become a dreamer, I guess, for lately I've let him go out alone while I stay ashore and enjoy my trance. I've sat right here alone three long hours many a time, and quite unconscious of the lapse of time; also quite happy."

"And would be now if alone, I assume?"

"Why, yes and no," glancing at him with droll smile. "I'm glad to have company, but I don't need it to be content. Do you always?"

"I must also say yes and no. I am not

> "'A hermit soul that can live withdrawn
> To the place of its self-content,'

as Sam Walter Foss says. I can go to that solitary retreat and abide a few hours happily, then my thoughts begin to bore me and I sigh for company — a congenial soul upon whom I can inflict my musings."

"And can you find such a one easily?" glancing at him with an amused smile. "I never could. Most people bore me. I like them in a way. Like to be told their joys, sorrows, and moods, briefly and for a time, and then, presto: after that they begin to bore me and I'd rather be alone."

"You can then live 'in the place of your self-content' and be happy, I assume?" smiled Stacy, peeping at her again.

"Why, yes, to be perfectly honest, I think I can. The only person who never did bore me is father. We go around together, often an hour without once speaking, and quite happy. I think it's because we both feel that we need not talk if we don't want to; just be together or within sight, that is all."

"Two hermit souls, eh?" queried Stacy, more than ever interested in this dreamy one beside him. "And yet I envy you both. It is a splendid thing to be content without company. It has been well said that those who are good company to themselves are pleasant companions to have, however. It is so with your father, I know. I've had quite a number of long visits with him and every moment enjoyable. How will it be between you and me should you guess?"

"That is easily answered," she returned archly and eyes atwinkle like her father's; "we shall often almost come to blows as we did that first evening when father interfered, or I shall bore you intensely.

"'New people are like old wine,' to quote Emerson again," she continued more seriously. "They pique, amuse, interest, or exasperate us as the case may be for a time, then after we come to know

them, seem commonplace. All but a select few, who become friends akin to us. That has been my experience. Also that to have a very few friends and dear ones is better than to have a host of acquaintances."

"And mine as well," agreed Stacy. "Strangers wear a halo, friends never do, and a hero is never one to his valet. To become commonplace to those we like and wish to have like us is pitiful. We want them to enjoy us, we desire to enjoy them, yet perpetually on guard stands the Ogre of Satiety and Commonplaceness, an invisible personage whispering, 'Keep apart, lest ye bore one another.' That is your idea, isn't it?"

"In a way, yes, and yet not," she answered musingly. "I feel as you do about friends. I want mutual enjoyment to come. I positively dread to feel a sense of boredom. I try to avoid it as much as possible. To that end, and because of this outcome, I also avoid too intimate relations; too close contact of mind with mind. It's far safer for souls to dwell apart."

"The hermit soul again," laughed Stacy. "I shall soon believe you have one after all."

"I think I have, too," she returned with naïve frankness. "I've lived alone in thought since old enough to think for myself. All my real friends

who never bore me are my books and father, so I have become a hermit soul, I guess. I am satisfied, however. To be able to live alone contentedly is to attain self-reliance, and that is no easy task. Can you?" And she turned her fathomless eyes full upon Stacy now.

"No," he admitted, seeing a chance to score a point; "if I could, I wouldn't be here sitting on the sand with you. I'd be attending to my duty at the dam.

"And by the way," he added, noting her slight flush following his assertion, "when are you to honor my new enterprise with your presence, as you promised? Won't you come up and inspect it now that we have — buried the hatchet?"

"I wasn't aware we owned one of those ominous things," she answered, smiling, "and I will visit your camp next Saturday morning with father and perhaps some of the girls. They are all anxious to see what you are doing. When will it be finished?"

"In seven months, I hope. I mean to close the gates on my birthday, May eleventh, and to celebrate that by so doing. I hope you will do the honors on that occasion and lower the gate; also break the customary bottle of wine over it."

Then, as was natural with him, he gave her a

brief resumé of his progress and plans in this work, and they were more condensed than usual, for her hint of being easily bored had borne fruit. Then, returning from a stroll down the beach to watch a flock of gulls that had alighted upon a bared sand-bar, they met Uncle Asa just landing at his wharf.

"I've had big luck to-day," he asserted buoyantly, in response to Stacy's usual query, and divesting himself of his overalls. "Got much ez fifty pounds, 'n' saved shorts nuff fer a good boil.

"We'll have a feast now," he added, passing the basket of lobsters to Stacy. "I'm hungry 'nuff to eat a mule with the harness on. How are you children?"

He next busied himself in the fire building; his big iron pot was brought from the fish house by Stacy, and with salt water in it was put over that to boil. He next went to the spring to bring water for coffee, and then began helping Hazel set the table, and soon a most toothsome meal of those chicken lobsters with plenty of butter and hot coffee was ready. Hazel had also brought a few other delicacies for dessert, and after the feast Uncle Asa hurried away to dig a mess of clams, as the bared flats now permitted.

"He means to leave us alone as much as possible," Stacy asserted to himself, next hastening away

to bring more water for dish-washing use, "and bless his dear old heart for it! He is of the salt of the earth, and all wool — no, all silk! And Hazel? Well, you are a keen one and no mistake! If I can court you without boring you, I'm smart; that is all!"

And Stacy was duly and decidedly right in that surmise.

He smiled at himself later on, in fact, laughed aloud as he began wiping the dishes that Hazel washed.

"If my partner could see me now," he declared in response to her inquiry, "he'd shout with insane hilarity. And my Aunt Carrie, mother, I call her — well, she'd want to kiss you, Miss Hazel."

"Would she, and why?" queried that little lady demurely, also fully conscious how fast this assertive young man was becoming enamored of her own sweet self.

"Well, in the first place, because she, being of rural birth, admires country-born girls; and next, she has a most — motherly interest in me," responded Stacy, not quite daring to admit the truth or how anxious his aunt was he should win this maid.

"Most of my friends would laugh, also, to see me wiping dishes," he continued hurriedly, "and

it is funny, and the first time I ever did so. I hope I may have the privilege again, and right here with you."

"I think we had better go and help father and wash his clams and leave the dishes to dry," rejoined Hazel, as soon as she handed the last one to Stacy, and to forestall further love utterances from him. "We are leaving father to do all the hard work." And quite oblivious to her own shoes, she led the way out upon the clam flats where he was doubled over.

And Stacy felt like picking her up and carrying her; also like taking his coat off for her to stand upon. He forgot his own boots as well in this new call; forgot his cuffs, his new fall suit — in fact, forgot everything except the one supreme fact that he was now bon-comrade with this exquisite little lady, and privileged to call her Hazel. He also rushed back to the fish house to bring her a board to stand upon as soon as he noticed how wet the sand was, whereupon Uncle Asa smiled serenely.

"Nice feller, 'n' thinks quick, which is what I like in him," he ejaculated, looking up to see what Stacy was after. "'N' say, girlie," he added tenderly, "don't lay up that deed matter agin him any more, will ye? He didn't mean no harm, jist thoughtless, that's all. 'N' 'member this, he may

be bossy 'n' sulky, but if he's handled right, he'll be all right. I've got faith in him." And having thus adjured his well-beloved "girlie" he bent to his work again.

"I'm mighty glad we took the day off 'n' come," he asserted a half-hour later, after all their belongings were stored in his small dory, and Hazel, well wrapped by Stacy, had taken the bow seat. "Powerful glad, I tell ye, children. Fust, because we've had a day 'n' dinner to think on, 'n' live over all winter, 'n' that's some comfort to me. I like this spot, Stacy," he added, addressing him, after taking his seat and glancing back at the wave-washed shore. "Like it better'n anywhere else in all the world. I've sometimes thought I'd build me a shack 'n' live here all summer. I may do it yit, jist to be near the water, 'n' hear it nights. Nothin' like the lullin' o' the waves to go to sleep by," he continued more earnestly, "'speshly when ye git old 'n' sleep comes hard. 'N' then mornin's here with the sun jist risin' 'n' the breeze blowin' in, 'n' right back in the bushes birds a-singin'! Wal, 'cordin' to my notion, it's 'bout ez near to heaven ez I'll ever git. I'd hev to come to meetin' once in a while to hear Hazel sing," he continued tenderly, as if her future was to be apart from his. "'N' o' course she'll hev to come 'n' slick the shack up now 'n'

then 'n' hev dinner with me. Couldn't git along 'thout seein' Hazel once a week, anyhow." And then as if this quite romantic outcome were his last will and testament, he bent to his oars in sturdy silence.

"I want to call Sunday eve; may I?" queried Stacy in a low tone when he parted from Hazel at the foot of the lane. And with her smiling, "I shall be glad to see you," he strode away.

And so ended a day that he never afterwards recalled without feeling that it ushered in a new existence for him, as in truth it did.

A quite suggestive and pretty surprise awaited Hazel in her parlor, also, for there in two vases were the three-dozen roses Stacy had ordered sent to himself, and which his partner had wisely directed to Miss Hazel Webster.

"They came this arternoon," Aunt Sally admitted, "'n' ez the box said 'flowers,' I put 'em in water to keep."

And then there came to Hazel a queer little tug at her heart-strings, for what with all her father had said that day, and her fast-changing feeling towards Stacy, it seemed her own future was already determined, as in a way it was.

CHAPTER XXXV

"DID a box come for me to-day, Sam?" demanded Stacy of that worthy on his return, and after reading his partner's laconic missive.

"No-o," drawled Sam with a comical twinkle in his eyes. "Uncle Levi only fetched one box from the train to-day. 'Big box o' flowers,' he said, 'fer Hazel Webster.' Mebbe it come from that Barre feller ez was here so long. He war kinder stuck on her, folks said." And Sam followed that assertion with a droll grin at Stacy.

That evening, also, with Stacy for sole companion — the Old Guard for a wonder being absent — he also relieved his mind, and made a few other admissions that in justice to him must be quoted.

"I s'pose you think my jokes are kinder hard on folks, Mr. Whipple," he began with as soon as Stacy had lighted his after-supper cigar, "'n' mebbe they be, but I don't mean no harm. Things are kinder slow in this hotel fer me. Nothin' doin' but see to the grub part, tend fires, 'n' set 'round waitin' fer folks to come 'n' go, 'n' I need livenin' up, I

do. Then agin thar's some o' the drummers comes here, they really need suthin to show 'em we ain't asleep ef we don't hev our hair cut once a week. I like the drummers; most on 'em are slickers, full o' fun, sharper'n tacks, square's a brick, 'n' allus pay. They all lay fer me, though, knowin' my ways 'n', b'gosh, they ketch me now 'n' then. Thar war one on 'em did once, mighty cute, too, 'n' scared me so I bit my tongue. He war a cigar drummer name o' Cady, Byron Cady, 'n' the funniest story teller on the pike. Allus got two or three new ones, 'n' kin tell 'em jist right, too. Wal, he come 'long with one o' them loaded cigars he'd had made fer me, fixed with a spring inside so when it burned an inch the spring'ud spread 'n' rip it all to pieces right under your nose. 'Sam,' he said that evenin' when we was all 'round the fire, 'I got a new brand o' clear Havana, Sumatra wrapper, that'll jist suit ye, 'n' yer trade, 'n' I want ye to try one.' Then he goes to his case, opens it front o' me, takes the cigar out o' a box full 'n' o' course I lit it, fer when he gives ye a cigar it's allus a good un. Wal, then I tilted back in my chair 'n' he begins tellin' a funny story 'bout a Frenchman who run a ferry boat, 'n' he kin hit off them Frenchies' lingo talk so ye'll split a-laughin'! Wal, I war pullin' at that cigar jist ez he got to the funny part, 'n' then it went off

'n' over I went back'ards, kerwhack, 'n' he 'n' the whole bunch jist roared fer ten minutes.

"Wal, o' course I took it good-natured; I had to, but I laid fer Cady, 'n' the next time he come 'long I was ready with 'bout a dozen blue crabs I got down the crick. Now a blue crab, Mr. Whipple, ez ye may not know, is a little cuss 'bout two inches broad with claws sharp ez needles, 'most, 'n' he kin use 'em quicker'n scat, 'n' bite hard ez a big lobster. Wal, Cady, he's a slick dresser, never goes out even-in's 'thout his top coat 'n' gloves on, 'n' the next time he come, 'n' when he put on his coat to go call on Bascom, ez I knew he would, thar wa'n't no gloves in his pockets, but them crabs was. O' course I cal'lated Cady ud feel fer them gloves 'n' ketch crabs, but it didn't somehow work. He put his coat on back o' the desk in the office whar he'd hung it back o' the door, wa'n't over a minute 'bout it, 'n' walked out smilin'. He'll find them crabs perty soon, I says to myself, chucklin', 'n' then thar'll be suthin doin'. I waited 'most an hour, then needin' a chew went to my coat hangin' in the office, too, ez I'd left a plug o' tobaccer in an outside pocket, 'n' by crackee, I got pinched by three o' them crabs quicker'n scat! 'N' by gosh, they took holt right sharp, they did!

"The worst on't was I gin a yip 'fore I thought

'n' threw one 'o them crabs over the desk, 'n' the hull crowd I'd posted up ketched on, 'n' the laugh was on me. 'N' how they roared! I had to set 'em up all round, 'n' when Cady come in they told him I'd bin chewin' blue crabs fer a change, 'n' it cost me 'nother round."

Sam was a voluble talker as well as inveterate joker, and while Stacy's thoughts were now on Hazel and the sweet illusion of love, instead of Sam's yarns, he had to listen to them for an hour.

Next morning, and a beautiful October one, Stacy joined the Sunday worshippers then entering the largest church where Hazel sang and here a surprise awaited him, for on its altar stood a vase of beautiful American Beauty roses!

"My contribution to her," he thought, "and she brought them up this morning, bless her! And Bert was wise to send them to her direct after all." Then smiled softly, as he now recalled his laconic letter.

He watched for Hazel's piquant face to rise above the choir curtains, felt himself transported to that "Beautiful Land on High" she sang as a solo later on, and felt almost a sense of ownership in her now, and that his future held a new and wondrously sweet charm. He waited for her to come out this time, received a slight bow and cordial

"Good morning" as she passed him on the steps, then crossed to the hotel, conscious that many of that congregation had observed this recognition and were positive he was now Hazel's "beau." Also quite proud to be so considered, as well he might be!

Somehow, also, the rest of the day seemed interminable. He hied himself away over the hills to his camp after dinner, halted to reconnoiter Hazel's home on the way, took a look around the works and at his men, now lounging under the pines, smoking or asleep, returned and wrote a lengthy letter to his partner, also one to his worthy aunt; and then after the manner of all lovers, hastened to the home of his charmer as early that evening as he dared.

His reception was in line with his feelings, for that occult little lady, conscious that she owed him quite a debt of gratitude for all he had done, meant to be charming and favor him with an enjoyable evening; also realizing that her pique over the deed matter had been largely imaginary. He found a bright fire adding cheer to the soft-shaded, lamp-lit parlor, a portion of his gift of roses conspicuous upon the center-table, one half-open one in her glossy crown of braided hair, and herself in rose-tinted gown adding a smiling welcome. And just

now after the usual greetings and when both were seated on opposite sides of the fire, she seemed to him the most exquisitely beautiful little lady in all the wide world! While she — well, just then it seemed that he made her parlor seem smaller!

For a man of his physique, sturdy and forceful, always commanded her respect.

"I thank you most gratefully for the beautiful roses I found awaiting me last evening," she said first of all, "and they were such a surprise."

"I'm glad they came on time," Stacy returned, smiling; "also that you were thoughtful enough to add charm to the church by a part of them. And by the way," wishing to check further allusion to his gift, "where did you find, or who is the author of that solo you rendered so charmingly? It is a gem and new to me. It just lifted me right into the pearly city we all hope to reach."

"Oh, that 'Beautiful Land on High'?" smiled Hazel. "Its author is a Mrs. A. H. Taylor, and it is my favorite. It carries just the mood I love best in church music, faith and hope combined, without the minor funereal tone I so dislike."

"It certainly carried me where I heard angels' wings rustling and saw them smiling," returned Stacy. "I shall expect it next Sunday again."

"Becoming converted, are you?" queried she

archly. "Mr. Upson will be delighted. Shall I speak to him?"

"Yes, if you like, and tell him if you can be persuaded to sing all the time, I will join his church at once."

"And he have no voice? No chance to preach? That would break his heart. He believes his sermons are all saving grace, especially those upon his favorite theme: the doom of all sinners. You don't admire such, I once heard you assert."

"No," responded Stacy bluntly, "I do not. Brimstone Corner is out of date now. Hope and Faith are all right and lovely, but the theory of a God who would punish eternally is an outrage upon the highest conceptions of Him! But pardon me, religious discussions should be tabooed outside of a pulpit. We once came near a quarrel upon that subject. I'd rather hear you sing."

"Then you consider women should be merely entertaining," smiling suavely. "Not have opinions, I infer?"

"Hardly that. I believe they should be entertaining and always charming, if possible. But an acrid discussion upon religious opinions is both futile and unwise. It is a case of every one having a right to his own opinion so long as it agrees with ours. Otherwise not."

"To agree not to disagree, look pleasant, smile and sing, but have no opinions is our proper rôle, you think? To be a mush of concession?"

"On the subject of religion, yes; on all others, no," he returned as suavely. "A lady who has no opinion is usually a bore. I want them to give me battle on any and all topics except religion."

"And why not that?" she persisted. "Why shouldn't we discuss that?"

"Simply because it's a personal conviction, a matter of blind faith upon which arguments are wasted. I do not apply that to you fair ones especially, I mean among men also.

"You spoke yesterday about people boring you so easily," he added after a moment's interim, and smiling. "I should hate to do so. I certainly wish to be entertaining, yet from what you said I feel I, too, may become wearisome as soon as you know me better."

"Possibly," she answered with perfect candor, "but I hope not. It's the bane of my life to feel as I said. I hate to do so. I'd far rather like everybody, enjoy everything they said, but I cannot. I never should have admitted what I did, however. Please forget it. To blurt out my own opinion is one of my serious failings, and loses me friends."

"It is apt to antagonize them, as I have found

myself. But you haven't answered my question. How can I avoid boring you as so many do?"

"You can't, if you ever should"— almost defiantly. "No one can. It's fate, that is all."

"Or affinity?" he interrupted.

"No, I do not believe in affinity — in no way, shape or manner," flushing slightly. "I positively abominate that word or its significance. No two people ever were created for one another! If they meet and agree or get along peaceably they are fortunate, and it is usually due to mutual effort to that end."

As this assertion, so near his own opinion, needed no response, Stacy made none, but glanced at the fire while his thoughts reverted to another one of driftwood a few weeks previous and how he lay beside it in surly meditation.

"A penny for your thoughts?" Hazel queried curiously, and watching him. "Where are you now?"

"Do you want to know the truth?" glancing at her again and smiling. "Well, I was back beside that campfire on the beach four weeks ago, no, five, and recalling how hurt I felt over your coldness."

"I'm sorry," in cooing tone, "but you can't blame me now? And — and I've tried to make amends, haven't I? Please forget it!"

"Retrospection of any mood is a waste of time I find," asserted Stacy. "We cannot live a day, an hour, even one moment over again.

"There is something else comes to me, also," he continued, ignoring the other matter. "Your father's romantic notion, and how he enjoys such outings, like an enthusiastic boy. It's wonderful in a man of his age, and I love him for it. And what an almost pathetic wish of his yesterday to go there and live alone summers, just to hear the ocean's lullaby at night, and see it close by every morning. Do you ever feel that way?"

"Sometimes, quite often, in fact," she returned dreamily, now down beside the sea herself. "Only, the ocean's voice and a lonely, wave-washed shore sadden me inexpressibly. It moves me to tears sometimes when I sit beside it alone. To pass one night there without company, no, thank you! Not for me!

"Its mood is grand, uplifting, and dwarfs all petty cares, however," she added with more elation, "makes me forget myself entirely."

And just then, as if the coincidence had been planned, the tall clock began chiming ten and Aunt Sally entered, bearing a tray of refreshments, said "Good evening, sir" to Stacy, placed the tray upon a small table and left the room. After this tête-á-

tête lunch had been enjoyed by him he needs must, as he did, persuade Hazel to favor him with her auto-harp; next, and as a Sunday evening finale, to sing "There is a Beautiful Land on High" again. And then he rose to go.

And now came a queer little, half-coquettish inquiry from Hazel: "Do you think I am combative in conversation, and disposed to argue," she asked smilingly, "strong-minded, in fact?"

"Oh, no, no, nothing of the sort," assuringly. "I like an argument, not a 'mush of concession.' Why do you ask?"

"Because of what you said about religion, and not to discuss it. I believe you are right in that. I hope you do not class me as strong-minded, however."

"Why, bless your dear heart, no, certainly not," he reiterated boldly. "You couldn't be anything but sweet and charming if you tried. And now with thanks for this delightful evening, when may I have another?"

"Any time you want an argument upon any subject except religion," smiling archly. "As father says, our latchstring is always out."

More than that, and as if to send him away happy, she followed him to the porch and stood to comment upon the cool, crisp evening, and how sug-

gestive of coming winter the dry, rustling leaves were.

"Remember," he said as a final word, "you are to visit me and my camp next Saturday. And why can't we take a drive in the afternoon? You make your official visit in the morning and we go driving in the afternoon? As I am to become a temporary resident here, I'd like to explore my surroundings.

"Bless her dear little heart, she can be winsome if she tries," he assured himself, now striding away, unconscious his feet touched the earth. "Also saucy, aggravating, captivating, argumentative, and piquant, all in one! I'm a goner, though, and it's yes or no some day."

CHAPTER XXXVI

A DETAILED courtship would be a monotonous recital, and that of the elusive Hazel and imperious, self-reliant Stacy more so, for there was no opposition. Her father, in spite of his optimistic faith in the honesty and goodness of all humanity, was yet shrewd enough to measure Stacy's attributes and see his many excellent qualities. He also knew that the best that could happen to his well beloved "girlie" was to win a life protector, and he had faith that Stacy would prove such a one. As already disclosed, he had said and done all he could to bring them together, and now as this result appeared probable, he was well content.

Stacy, also, as Sam asserted at first, was "tendin' right to the gal" on all probable or opportune occasions. When Wednesday evening came again, it found him in her quaint old parlor enjoying the cigar she insisted that he smoke. The next inevitable Thursday evening prayer meeting, whose hymn-singing was under her direction, found him

an attendant, and he walked proudly away with her as escort, followed by the envious glances of other girls, and the smiles, nods and " I told you so's " of all the old ladies.

And this very fact, that Hazel, as she did now, accepted his proffered company home with a smiling nod, assured him that she was quite willing to have him recognized as her " beau."

" We are marked as keeping company now," he said to her on this occasion as they walked away; " do you care? "

" No, I am not any more ashamed of it than you are," she returned facetiously, " and really it is very nice of you, for it has been a lonely walk home for me."

When Saturday came — and fortunate for both, a warm and pleasant one — Hazel with four of her girl friends and her father for escort, paid their promised visit to Stacy's camp to see how fast his work was progressing. That was of keen and especial interest to Hazel, for all around and out in the morass of Bear Hole Swamp, axes were ringing, trees crashing as they fell, while nearer to them, below — in fact — came the sharp click of stone masons' hammers and chisels squaring stones, the creak of a derrick swinging them into place, and the shouts of men driving oxen. The long, narrow, ten-

foot-high barracks which its double row of cot beds, enough for the hundred men, was next inspected, also the cooking- and dining-rooms under the same tarred-paper roof, and last of all, Stacy's office, a six-foot-square shanty at one corner of this.

"It's quite a contract to feed so many men, and keep them working effectively," he said to the girls after they had romped about and exclaimed over everything, girl-like; "and evenings here are quite picturesque with a dozen campfires going under the pine trees, and men lounging and smoking around them. We have music, too," he added, smiling at Hazel, "of a sort, at least, for two or three play banjoes, there are a couple of accordions, several mouth organs, and one old fellow plays the fiddle. An incongruous medley of instruments, yet not so bad either, with firelight and canopy of pines to add romance. There are several fairly good singers in the bunch, two darkies especially, and some evening I'd like to bring you girls over to hear and see the fun, or usual concert, unbeknown to them."

The afternoon drive in Sam's best, in fact, the only modern top buggy in Oakdale, was most enjoyable to Stacy, however, for now he had the charming Hazel all to himself. They first drove to the shore, reaching it by a mere path through the bordering scrub oaks, then as the tide was out,

trotting upon the hard sand for a five-mile stretch and close to the gentle wave-wash, returning through a long and winding, woods-bordered, seldom-traveled road.

"It's woods, woods everywhere," Stacy remarked, after an hour of this, "and Oakdale is the most hid-away village I ever found. For that reason, it is charming in summer. My plans, and the possible influx of new people, will spoil it," he continued regretfully, "spoil it for all time. Spoil that cozy little harbor where no one goes except your father, spoil the pretty beach where we camped, the long sand spit in front of his fish house, and Oakdale with its village green, its restful quietude; its two churches and your brown schoolhouse will be no more. You will be sorry, won't you, Hazel?" he queried, thus addressing her for the first time. "Sorry I ever came to Oakdale, won't you?"

"For that reason, yes, in a way," she answered frankly, "and yet it can't be helped. If you hadn't come to upset our sleepy town, someone else would — in time, I presume. And then"— after a pause —"I don't believe I have quite appreciated Oakdale's charm until now that you say it must be spoiled. A case of how blessings brighten as they take their flight. To me, always living here,

it has seemed lonesome and humdrum. But you — you need not upset us unless you insist," she added, glancing curiously at him; "you can build your dam and power house, we shall have a pretty lake in place of that swamp, and you can let it go at that, can't you?"

"Of course, and would you like to have me?"

"Perhaps, and perhaps not," she rejoined evasively. "In fact, I've not understood just what you really expected to do, only what father said might happen, shops built, and more people come here to live, and work in them."

And then to interest and enlighten his charmer, Stacy began and built his air-castle city over again.

"It looks pretty — in the air," she responded, smiling, after his city was thus built and trolley cars running, "and is probably a creditable ambition on your part. But, and you must excuse me, I don't believe you will live long enough to see it. I hope you may, however. Your heart seems set upon it."

"A case of aiming at a star and hitting a sheep barn," laughed Stacy, rather pleased at her frankness. "But I shall hope to interest you in time, shall keep on trying, anyhow," and then he chirruped to the horse and drove on.

It was just sunset when they emerged from the

woods on a hilltop overlooking Oakdale. To the left was the opening vista of the V-shaped valley ending at the bordering ocean. Just below was Hazel's home, peeping out from a thicket of yellow and scarlet foliage; to the right the village group of houses, hotel and two churches around an open green, and across this vale were enclosing hills ablaze with autumn color.

Somehow, too, just now as Stacy halted his horse to survey this panorama, Hazel's half-hearted approval of his plan recurred to him. Life here was peaceful to her as to the rest. They were all, as Uncle Asa had asserted, neither rich nor poor, but content, which meant more. And why spoil this peaceful life, why upset this hamlet by the building of shops and inducing an alien population to come and crowd themselves into it? He did not need the money he might make by this innovation? His business in Albion was prospering? Why not abandon his air castle and save Oakdale for a summer home for Hazel and himself — if he won her?

"What you said or didn't say has made me almost sorry I've planned to build a city here," he said, glancing at her. "And I've half a notion to let it drop. Would you advise it, or rather do you wish I would?"

"Why, that is a serious question," she returned,

flushing at the consciousness of how important her own opinions were becoming to him. "I don't like what they call factory towns, made up of poor mill operatives, and if you plan to make this such a one — well, I wish you wouldn't do it."

"I don't plan for that," anxiously, "not a cotton-mill town. Only to induce other industries, those that employ higher-priced labor, to locate here, and also give employment to Oakdale people."

"But you can't pick and choose, can you? If someone wants to build a cotton mill here, he can, can't he?"

"Why, yes — if we rent the power, of course. Otherwise not."

"And can you dictate that?"

"I shall," he returned forcibly, "unless I abandon the plan entirely to — to please you."

And just then he came near adding what would have meant a proposal of marriage.

"Well, we must be going on, or you will be late home to supper," he continued hurriedly, with a toss of the reins, and "Go on," to Sam's sedate nag.

A sudden heart-leap came to Hazel also at this moment, for she, keen to read others' moods and thoughts, understood his mood perfectly now, and

saw that in the near future she must give the "yes" or "no" that was to dominate her future life.

But was she willing to make it "yes"?

And just then as they turned down the road to her home, her father's almost pathetic assertion of how he wished to pass his remaining years recurred to her. Also her own firm resolve to abide by him and care for him as long as he lived. A queer, and quite new thrill came as Stacy practically lifted her out of the carriage, and his "Good-bye, Hazel, and thank you, too," in response to her "Thank you for the ride," also set her heart a-flutter.

A little sense of guilt followed this new wave of feeling when she found her father had been waiting supper for her almost an hour, and his smiling, "Wal, I hope you've had a pleasant time this arternoon, girlie; these days won't last long," only added to it. And then it occurred to her that she had entirely forgotten him, home, her school and all else in her life, during the five hours she had been driving with Stacy!

"I have enjoyed my ride very much," she assured him as they sat down to supper. "We drove the whole length of Long Beach, up to the Barre road, and all around Oakdale. He is a very in-

teresting talker, and do you know, father, he is almost sorry he has planned to build shops here and, as I think, spoil Oakdale."

"But think o' the money he'll make out on't," rejoined her father, smiling at her naïve admission, "'n' 'twon't spile Oakdale, either; jist give folks a chance to make a better livin' than farmin'."

She was unusually tender to her father that evening, also. Brought him his slippers, smoking jacket, and even cleaned out and filled his cob pipe for him in the sitting-room, then brought her autoharp and played all his favorite airs.

A few days later, in fact, the next Wednesday evening when Stacy called, he suggested, as the moon was now favorable, that they make a visit to his camp.

"We can keep out of sight of the men," he assured her. "They will all be gathered around the fires, and from a vantage point I know up on one of the hills we can look down and see or hear what is doing." And glad so to reconnoiter this crew of strange men, Hazel put on a wrap, took Stacy's arm, and they followed the identical upward path that had brought him to her five months previous!

"Here," he said, soon halting under a big pine

beside the path, "is where I first heard your autoharp the day I found you — and thought it spirit music. I'm going to cut our initials in this tree some day when I find time, just to commemorate that fortunate fact," then continued as if her consent were assured.

"How like fairyland and what a bewitchment moonlight falling through pine trees has," he added, as they kept on along the velvety path, "and how pretty. A sort of weird mysticism in it, ethereal and spectral in a way, but fascinating."

"I wouldn't care to come up here alone," rejoined Hazel, clinging to his arm a little closer. "I'd imagine ghosts might be lurking here in the shadows."

"Do you believe in them?" queried Stacy curiously.

"Why no-o, not exactly," hesitating a little, "and yet, believing in a future existence as I do — well, it's not easy to separate faith in that from ghost legends or the fact so many do believe in them. Sensible and intelligent people, too, like our Aunt Sally. She is positive that they are seen occasionally. What is your opinion?"

"All imagination or superstition," he rejoined briskly, "and a relic of bygone times when people

believed in incantations, sorcery, witchcraft, and all that sort of thing. It's what we can't see in this world that scares us — our imagination."

But a queer medley of sound, the plink of a banjo, the click of bones, and a scuffle of feet dancing upon a board, that now came to them adown the somber, moonlit, pine-filled gorge, ended this discussion, and soon, piloted by Stacy to his vantage point above them, Hazel saw a red-shirted negro dancing upon a square of board in front of a fire, while another seated on a rock picked and swept his fingers across a banjo with all the force and abandon of his race. A white boy was shaking a pair of castanets, two score men squatting around were clapping hands in time, while grouped about these in all positions was the camp's entire crew. A shout and hand-clapping rewarded the dancer when he stopped, a white man took his place, and so for a half hour this unique exhibition went on. Next, after a brief interim of mingled voices and laughter too distant to be heard by the listening ones, the banjoist swept his fingers across the strings and Hazel heard what to her was a rare treat, that old plantation hymn, " Roll, Jordan Roll," sung as only a negro can sing it beside a campfire at night with fifty other voices joining in the chorus!

A SCUFFLE OF FEET DANCING ON A BOARD.—*Page 454.*

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And how it swelled and rose and rolled up through the canopy of pine boughs! How its wild and weird refrain filled that shadowy moonlit gorge, echoed across from hill to hill, pulsed and throbbed in the still night air with all the hope and cry for help from a race of slaves that has made it famous!

After that came another of similar tenor, "Good Lord, Remember Me," and then as if love were the first, last, and best emotion of all, this big red-shirted artist rendered two of Hazel's favorites —"My Gum Tree Canoe" and "Suwanee River."

"I've tried to feel and throw the real spirit of those songs into them," she whispered to Stacy, when a pause came, "but I can't sing them as he does."

And then presto — and bearing both listeners back to their first moment of meeting — up came that sweetest of all plantation songs, "Don't You Hear Dem Bells A-Ringing?"

And that, now sung in softly-modulated tenor voice, almost carried the charm of Hazel's auto-harp in its bell-like chords, and soft tinkling notes wafted up through the pine-bough canopy and vibrating with all the pathos of distant bells at eventide!

"Oh, but that bell song is exquisite," added Hazel at its conclusion; "how I wish I could equal it!"

"Pshaw, he doesn't compare with you one moment for fine shading of tone," Stacy assured her, as might be expected, "and remember that time, place, and distance lend charm. I knew the singing would sound better up here, and so brought you here. We will come again some evening and bring your father. I'd like him to hear them." Then as it was getting late, he lifted his companion as if he owned her, tucked one hand around his arm, and side by side they followed the moon-checked, winding, velvety path down the canopied gorge, as if it led into a new and ethereal world, as indeed it did for them!

And it must be said, Stacy, cool and business-like as a rule, had hard work not to halt right beneath the fragrant pines and risk all with one plea for this matchless maid clinging to his arm!

CHAPTER XXXVII

FOR two months now, or until the maples enclosing Hazel's home were bare of foliage, Stacy scarcely thought of anything except her, or to direct his men and push the work forward as fast as possible, as a minor issue. Curtis North, Otero, and the outcome of Harkins's raid in those two swindlers' latest field of operation, had also partially faded from his memory when one evening, returning from the home of his charmer, he found a letter from Harkins awaiting him at the hotel.

"I have delayed writing you until I could report some definite action by our law mill," he wrote, "and what was likely to be done with your friend 'Whiskers.' He, as you may not know, brought one lawyer along with him from New York, who, of course, has only a limited standing in our courts. He has also engaged two of our best ones to defend himself and Otero, and with ample funds, as it appears, he is prepared to give us a long legal fight and will probably do so. We have him in jail, however, and all our prosecuting

attorney has been able to do so far is to keep him from obtaining bonds and liberty. In this connection, also, I recall your rather sarcastic criticism of lawyers in general, and inasmuch as two of our leading ones are now taking this d— swindler and murderer's money in his defense and to defeat justice if they can, I must admit your sneers were justified. I have 'Bricktop' here safe in limbo, though at our preliminary hearing she proved a poor witness for us, and swore both the Swedes came to her cabin drunk, that the one who was found dead fell from the top of a ladder leading up to the loft of her cabin, also that neither Curtis North nor Otero were in it at the time. She admits being partially drunk when the accident happened, and swears she fell asleep after it and left the two miners there, drunk, as she supposed. What complicated our case the most is the fact that Tygson has vanished. He came on with us to Rawhide, promised me on his honor he would appear as witness when wanted, went up to Humpback, and two days later bought a horse, packed up a camp outfit, and left for parts unknown. I have since learned he obtained a bill of exchange for twenty-five thousand dollars at our bank (the foxy cuss), and sent it to a sister of his in Sweden. I imagined North advised him to do this on the way here, with

threat of retribution if he appeared against him in court. I am now sorry we obtained his money for him the way we did.

"I had some fun with my two birds on the way, for the nearer we got to Rawhide, the more scared they became, and just before we reached the Junction, and as a final bid for liberty, North offered me an even hundred thousand to get off and leave him on the train. He was like a wet rag going up to Rawhide and scared silly besides. I had the most fun when we got there, for I had wired one of my friends to meet us with a few of the boys and make believe they meant to lynch North. It all went off per order, rope ready — two, in fact, and a hundred men yelling 'Hang him, string 'em both up,' as we hustled them into a carriage, with me flourishing a gun and threatening to shoot!

"And 'His Whiskers' still believes my defiance of the mob was all that saved his neck! Of the two, Otero showed the most sand, in fact, damned North with the choicest collection of Mexican cuss words on top of ours, I ever heard, for being such a coward. I think the outcome will be that Otero will turn State's evidence to save his own neck, and so we may get a second-degree verdict on North. I can't hope for more with such a liar as 'Bricktop' for sole witness for us, and probably a fat

rake-off from North for her if he saves his neck. We are, as you see, up against a tough proposition, plenty of money, two sharp lawyers meaning to get the most of it, and our only witness one who can beat the devil at lying. Will keep you posted, however. With best wishes to your funny old farmer friend, Uncle Asa, and the lady, I remain

"Yours fraternally,

"JIM."

"Well, it's just about as I expected," declared Stacy in disgust, after perusing this lengthy missive, "and Curtis North, one of the most dangerous villains who ever caught the unwary, will probably continue at that game in spite of all law! He has the price, two hungry attorneys like sharks after it, and they won't let up as long as his money lasts! Talk about the blind Goddess of Justice and her pair of scales! She ought to be portrayed as perched upon a pile of gold bags, holding one aloft, and laughing at a cordon of lawyers grouped about on their knees!"

When Uncle Asa read this missive, as he did next day when he, as so often now, visited Stacy at the camp, his comment may also well be quoted.

"Looks like the critter 'ud go scot free, 'n' back to skinnin' farmers 'n' fools agin, don't it?" he

asserted after so doing, "'n' I ain't a mite s'prised. Jist so long's a villain's got money, jist so long'll them sharks o' lawyers keep arter it, makin' b'lieve defend him till it's gone. Then he can go hang for all they care. Fact is, 'cordin' to my notion, most o' the laws is made by lawyers on purpose so they can juggle with 'em like stackin' cards, 'n' so git fees. I've bin in court jist to look on 'n' hear them green-bag fellers wrangle 'n' sass one 'nother. But the case is one o' now ye see it, now ye don't, to the sucker who's payin' the bill. All he kin tell is that it's inter one o' them green-bags with his money, 'n' 'now ye don't see it' arter that! Never the money, anyhow!

"'N' I've allus figgered the judge were sorter half cahoots with them sharks in the game likewise. They war lawyers, o' course, to start on, 'n' birds of a feather allus flock together.

"Curis, curis, Stacy," he added meditatively, "how one half o' the world lives on t'other half most o' the time. That sharper come along 'n' skinned me, you come along 'n' fined him six thousand to larn him a lesson, the lawyers ketched him next, 'n' who'll ketch the lawyers nobody knows. The divil himself is the only one sharp 'nuff, I cal'late."

Be that as it may be, however, the two (or rather

two and one-half, for that was all the New York lawyer counted in the game) who had taken Curtis North in hand — also his money — so twisted and perverted all evidence that they came near proving 'Bricktop' to have been a sort of innocent Red Riding Hood, who, with her equally chaste lady friend, had been lured to Rawhide by the two Swedish wolves in miner's garb and drugged to accomplish their ruin; that Curtis North was an honorable business man who had sought to rescue them from the hands of two drunken miners. They obtained postponements and re-hearings on the score of new evidence discovered, and finally introduced the novel plea that Tygson, aided and abetted by the other woman in the case, had lured his so-called friend, Johnson, to 'Bricktop's' cabin, then drugged, robbed, and murdered him. In proof of that, he had now left the country. Curtis North also swore that Harkins had first extorted thirty thousand dollars from him as hush money, which he handed to Tygson, then arrested him as a bluff game, and all that saved Harkins from impeachment and trial was his record for unswerving honesty and fearless discharge of his duty. The case was kept in court for over two years by various legal subterfuges, until Harkins and the prosecuting attorney, fearing that the arch-criminal,

Curtis North, would escape all punishment, decided to promise immunity to Otero for turning State's evidence, which he did with all haste. As proof conclusive of what a farce and travesty on justice some criminal trials are, he swore, and it was admitted as evidence, that Curtis North had exercised a hypnotic influence over him for years, compelled him to go to this woman's cabin against his will, had sent him out to buy more liquor and a sleeping powder to put in it, and that, drunk himself, he saw North deal the fatal blow to Johnson and rob him. As corroborative proof of this, he also swore to the fact that North had given him money and sent him to Oakdale to buy Bear Hole Swamp, as well as other malign and evil deeds. In rebuttal, North's lawyers proved conclusively that Otero had been a professional gambler and blackleg, horse and cattle thief, and had served time for one of the latter crimes, and finally obtained a manslaughter verdict for their client with extenuating circumstances and a minimum sentence of six years in prison for it.

Also, as every one knew full well, they obtained all the money he had brought to Rawhide with him!

"Begorra," said the irrepressible McCue to Harkins when the verdict was announced and North

taken away to serve it, "thar do be only wan wa
to sarve the loikes o' him an' thot the ould one
Jist a few o' the b'ys thot know their business, a
rope 'n' convanient limb, 'n' thar ye be! An' thir
look at the fun we missed seein' him sthrung up
wid dhrinks all round after thot, an' iverybod
thratin', an' maybe a foine fight fer a windup
Now 'tis to spind two years provin' everybody is a
liar till we forgit what the mon done an' wimmir
sind flowers to him in the jail. Ochone, but the
toimes has all gone wrong, an' dom dull now, dom
dull!"

Something else, also, of pertinent interest wa
learned by Stacy soon after this on one of his occa
sional visits to Barre and from Davis, chairman o
that city's Improvement Committee.

"Your gay and festive friend, J. Smith Alton
left town between two days last week, Brother
Whipple," he said to him smilingly. "Also left
quite a few mourning for their bills as well. He
was defeated for councilman by a landslide at our
October election, notified if he didn't resign from
my committee, charges of betraying a trust and
bribery would be preferred against him, and he de-
cided the best way was to vamoose, and did so. He
took good care to borrow all he possibly could be-
fore departing, and those victims are all who regret

his departure. I have heard he was seen in New York recently with a very handsome black-eyed lady."

"Miss Carmen, I presume," smiled Stacy, well pleased, "and probably hunting for her friend Otero and the mate to a diamond bracelet she was expecting for assistance in doing me. She won't get it, however, for this Otero has troubles of his own just now," and then after showing Davis the letter from Harkins, Stacy told him the whole story from his meeting Uncle Asa to the final scene in New York.

"What an all-around, double-distilled, dyed-in-the-wool fool a man is to get bedeviled by a woman like this Carmen," he declared, after the long story was ended. "A spider spinning a web for unsuspecting flies is an honest fellow in comparison, for such as she weaves one over the most invincible and compelling of all human impulses, that once aroused leave the victim no chance whatever except to be robbed, gladly. Even thankful to be so duped, fleeced, and finally dishonored as this fellow, Alton, has been. The one factor and feature of this matter most exasperating to me, or rather one that wakens my contempt for man's frailty most, is the fact that otherwise level-headed and sensible business men can, and are continually being duped and

preyed upon by Carmens of every age, shape, colo
or previous condition of depravity.

"I do not wonder cynics sneer and savants jeer
Puck ought to have said, 'What fools these me
can be!'"

CHAPTER XXXVIII

FOR almost two months now, or since that evening of mutual confession, and obliteration of Stacy's sulks, he had not only been paying most assiduous court to Hazel, but dwelling in the seventh heaven of illusions. Each Sunday found him at church, garbed spick and span as the best Albion tailor could make him, and rain or shine he was sure to be beside her cheerful fire those evenings as well. When Thursday evening arrived, he was on hand to escort her home from that inevitable prayer meeting, and to tuck her hand around his arm in the manner of proprietorship, then walk away as if he owned her! More than that, and in spite of her warning that boredom might follow too intimate association, he dared that by presenting himself at the throne of her grace on other evenings as well. They went driving each Saturday afternoon, weather permitting, and a box of choice flowers and a five-pound one of candy came up from Albion alternately on those days until, as might be expected, all Oakdale felt positive

that they were engaged lovers, and spoke accordingly.

And yet, after those weeks, delightful to both, they were not, neither had the word, love, been even hinted at, except by insinuation from Stacy. They talked much, however, discussing all proper subjects in fearless manner, occasionally disagreeing, for Hazel had a mind of her own and was not afraid to express it; and Stacy, while not dogmatic, was equally fearless of opinion. More than that, he was keen enough to realize that Hazel enjoyed a contest of argument, with due deference to her conviction, of course, and that concession, or a "yes, yes" to all her opinions, would inevitably mean her feeling bored, and the end of her interest in him. He even — so anxious was he to entertain and interest her — sent for the complete works of her favorite author, Emerson, and between times or calls read assiduously. And they, as they could not fail to do, soon opened his eyes to a new horizon and a broader, nobler and more spiritual meaning to life and its moods and impulses.

For occult reasons, also, he made no mention of this study — and it is a study to all who read Emerson understandingly — until he had grasped what may be called the outlines of this philosopher's mind — his analysis of the why and wherefore of hu-

man emotions and actions, their origin, outcome, and final purpose in life. Then Stacy, thus armed and equipped and anticipating a delightful exchange with Hazel, broached the subject of Emerson.

"I've gone to the fountain source of your many pertinent epigrams and profound truths, Hazel," he said to her that evening, once more beside her cheerful fire, "and I've had a treat; also a struggle, for Emerson is a deeper thinker than I am accustomed to, and not easily understood."

"I'm glad," she rejoined, her eyes a-twinkle and smiling, "for now you can understand why I once admitted I was so easily bored by commonplace conversation — personal history, gossip, and all that sort of thing that so many indulge in. Which of his books have you been reading?"

"Oh, his Essays, of course; they came first, and do you know I read them, then his miscellaneous writings, next his poems, and returning to his Essays, found I had not even grasped a tithe of their deep meaning. I've read the one I like best, 'Compensation,' over four times; 'Self-Reliance,' 'Friendship,' 'Love,' and 'Spiritual Laws' twice each, and find I've not as yet more than skimmed them. He is a wonderful thinker, and in writing condenses more into fewer words than anyone else I ever read. To follow him understandingly, requires

the closest application. He is a mine of analytical wisdom. But 'Compensation' is the gem of all his writings, and as a guide to how to live and enjoy what is best in life it is worth more than all the sermons I ever heard. I've had a treat, thanks to you."

"'Compensation' is a classic," she rejoined, her eyes brimming with mischief. "But what induced you to delve into him? You whose leading ambition was to build a big dam and transform sleepy old Oakdale into a city of spindles and mill operatives and make a lot of money! I am astonished! Why is this thus?"

"Well, you are the first reason," he returned boldly. "You have been quoting him to confound me, and did so most adroitly; routed me horse, foot, and dragoons, so to speak, so that I've been compelled to read Emerson in self-defense. Beyond that, and accepting one of your assertions literally, I've had cold chills lest I bored you."

Then the elusive Hazel laughed right merrily.

"Stealing my thunder, eh?" she ejaculated, subsiding. "Robbing me of my trite axioms, thou brave knight? I am surprised! And so you have mastered Emerson to confound me in turn," she continued piquantly and resolving to catechise her admirer. "If this be so, the class of one in 'Com-

pensation' will now take his place and recite. What is it the big trees seem to say to mere man coming out of the heated caucus?"

"'Why so hot, my little sir?'" answered Stacy smiling, "and that the affairs of men are but trifles in comparison with time and the growth of a vast forest. A petty diversion soon forgotten."

"And have you learned the real inner reason why it is best to pay scot and lot as you go along?" she continued, watching him. "Why the borrower runs into his own debt?"

"To pay all debts promptly means to escape all sense of obligation at once. To be able to look the whole world in the face undaunted and say, 'Go, chase thyself,' if need be," laughed Stacy.

"And can you do a wrong without suffering a wrong?" persisted Hazel. "Can you strike a weaker one without the blow becoming a boomerang returning to smite you?"

"No, never; nor dig a pit for thy fellow man, thy brother, without falling into it thyself with a dull thud, as Curtis North did," rejoined Stacy complacently. "The blow he aimed at your father, his robbery, returned to smite him tenfold. A boomerang of mighty force that divested him of fortune, swept him across a continent, and landed him behind prison bars."

"I see you have garnered and applied a few Emersonian truths," smiled Hazel admiringly "not enough to deserve the laurel wreath, however Can you as yet truthfully say that you distrust and fear all flattery? That praise is dangerous and distorts your own perspective of yourself almost inevitably?"

"I can't quite say that," admitted Stacy frankly "I like to be well thought of — by you especially Like to have those I care for like me, and show it in some manner. Not by word, however, by deed, rather, which is, after all, flattery of the most occult sort. In short, I am like most of humanity one who prefers being appreciated, not misunderstood. For instance, it is a satisfaction to me to feel your father believes in both my honesty and honor. Also that I have some common sense. Is that dangerous flattery, oh, sweet and fair teacher?"

"Both adjectives are flattery to me," she asserted instantly, yet smiling. "I must allow I like them, as you admit what you like. But that does not disprove Emerson's contention that all flattery is dangerous. I still insist and believe that it is."

"In a way, yes, for we are never sure there isn't a sinister intent back of it. Some axe to grind. Won't you allow it from those you trust thor-

oughly? Those you have proved that you can trust?"

"By deed and implication, yes, by word — well, I must say that I rebel at all words of praise except from one person, my father. Praise from him is very sweet, because I know it comes from his love, which is absolutely and entirely unselfish. I feel I am a part of him in soul-life, anyway, as I must be."

For one long moment Stacy's eyes rested upon the sweet, piquant face of Hazel with deep, tender admiration. He saw her now as never before, and that beyond or within a face and form so charming that all men must admire and want to praise, lay a soul, dauntless, clear-eyed, sincere, pure and truthful. He realized that she saw him as he was, with all his faults and foibles. Also recognized his honesty of purpose and sense of honor. In a way, as well, he saw, or was conscious that his own soul stood bared to her. That she had analyzed him by word and deed; that she, a metaphysical student, almost, in spite of her tender years, could read and measure his mind and moods as easily as her great mentor, Emerson, could those of all humanity. Beyond this, also, and more satisfying, came the instantaneous consciousness that her ac-

ceptance of his company so often and in the face of all Oakdale meant that she was willing to do so. Meant that she cared not one whit what they said or thought about it. That she, high-spirited and proud beyond their possible conception, was yet willing to walk beside him in full view, willing to be seen, known and discussed as his almost daily companion and mate, as she had been now for months. And realizing all this as never before, almost was he now compelled to ask for final acceptance and her promise to share his life for weal or woe, for joy or sorrow.

"I often think," she then said, divining his thoughts, perhaps, and flushing at his ardent gaze, "how much I need my father's abiding love and faith, and how impossible for me to be happy without it. We have grown together, he and I, in soul-life and appreciation of Nature. He has read all my best books, too, just to keep pace with me in thought or study, I fancy. Sometimes we discuss them as you and I have Emerson, though seldom; but better than that, and like a tonic to me, is his old-fashioned, homely way of hitting the nail on its head; of uttering the truth and facts of the case in few words and to the point. He never bores me, seems to know just how I feel and think about all matters, and beyond that I am compelled to feel that

his sole ambition in life is my own happiness. Of course, the inevitable compensation comes in my feeling the same way towards him."

"'Two hermit souls,'" quoted Stacy again, and not at all jealous of it. "You certainly have 'blazed your path where never highway ran' for I never saw or knew of a father and daughter so devoted, so independent of the whole world, and so little in need of anything it can give. But —"

"No, don't say it," she interrupted hastily, reading his thought, "for I know it all the time. How can I help it when I look at his wrinkled face? But that is of to-morrow, and to live one day at a time is our motto." Then, as if there could be but one outcome of this line of thought from Stacy, a proposal, which must be forestalled, she arose speedily and went to her piano.

"I have a new song," she asserted, now hunting for it, "and I'm going to inflict it upon you, willy-nilly. We have discussed metaphysics long enough."

Then Stacy, quite at home here now, added two sticks of white birch wood to the fire, lit a cigar with a shred of bark, crossed his legs and lay back in his armchair, content to enjoy what the gods had so far vouchsafed him, and quite sure the time would come when this rare and keen-witted maid

must turn to him for love and protection. Ar just now, also, while he blew smoke rings lazily ar watched her, the growth of this now well-estal lished bond passed in retrospection. He saw h once more, as at first, under the big pine, and leapir to her feet in sudden alarm at his appearanc Next, the first meal she had served him so graciousl and with such tactful converse, her cool indifferenc in the strawberry field, how he had had to beg for a invitation to call, her continual distrust of him, an almost chilling neglect upon their first visit to th shore; and worse than that, her frosty demeanc all through the camping-out episode, with only or utterance from her he cared to now recall. H fit of sulks came next, and how for three long week of evenings, he, though hungering for a sight c her sweet face, held himself aloof in sullen ange

And then the chance meeting on the highwa and how close he came to letting his pride continu its rule and perhaps part them forever, and hov step by step after that, they had drawn nearer t one another along the highway of life, until nov — oh, blessed consciousness — she was willing t walk beside him at all times and before the whol world!

But would she be willing so to continue all he life? To give herself to him, to have and to hol

to love and care for, all that long or short journey? He understood her better now. How self-reliant she was, how little of the personal, selfish side of human nature there was in her make-up, and how much of the spiritual, the noble, the altruistic attribute she had. She was like that rare flower, the edelweiss, growing along the borders of perpetual snow, and as sweet and pure. She might accept the sunshine of love and protection, perhaps, but did not need it, for as she had just assured him, and truthfully, too, as he believed, she was content to devote herself to her one best companion — her father. Stacy did not mean that she should, however, just now. He meant to beg for admittance into her empyrean realm, her kingdom along the snow line, and to that end and purpose, and for that consummation, all other plans of his must and should conspire. Then, too, as an added incentive, came her father's apparent wish for that result, and his almost pathetic self-effacement in a hermit life down beside the lonely shore.

And how could it all be brought about? How sever these two life-companions, so satisfied with one another? Would love and wifehood be sufficient for the azure-souled Hazel? Sufficient to satisfy and replace a kinship that had been hers since childhood? It seemed almost too much to

expect! In fact, that consciousness, that realization of how bound together these two were, had kept Stacy silent so long. Silent at least to the extent of proposing what must mean a separation.

And now, with the evening and fire both waning, and Hazel, beautiful as a painter's classic dream, sounding the chords of an old-time love song but a few feet away, Stacy was as far from it as he had been for months.

He was in nowise afraid of her, or to put the question and win or lose all. Only — and now her own assertions of the dread of commonplaceness recurred to him — was he capable of assuming so great a charge, so delicate a task as being soul-mate for such as she? They were both happy now, or content in a way. He with his air castle and ambition, she with her school for diversion, and home life and father for consolation. How would it be if he thrust himself into this? If they married and he transplanted her to Albion and social life there, as perforce he must, would that work out to her satisfaction and content? Could or would all he might do for her satisfy and make amends for the soul-staff she had leaned upon so long — her father?

"It is getting late and I must be going, Hazel," he said in his usual tone now, rising after his long

meditation, and she, as was usual now, helped him on with his coat and opened the door for him to depart.

"I've had a more than ordinarily enjoyable evening, Hazel," he said, with unusual tenderness this time, and pausing in the open door. "All evenings are charming with you, as you must know, this more than most, for I've obtained a glimpse into your inner soul-life. I — I wish you needed me as much as I do you."

Then, as if this was meant to set her thinking, he added a hasty "good night," and strode away.

And then Hazel, quite conscious of what was in his heart, also with a sweet pain in her own, sat down beside the dying fire and stared into the faintly glowing embers. And how empty the room seemed just now, and how like "never — forever — forever — never" sounded the tall clock's tick, mingling with the low murmur of the near-by brook outside, and the rustle of dead leaves in the night wind!

"I am doing wrong, very wrong," she said to herself next, leaning her face in one hand with elbow on chair arm, after five minutes of this soul communion. "He is getting more and more in love, and I am letting him. He came near proposing

to-night! It must not be! It must not be, with poor old poppy planning to live alone by the sea! No, no, it must not be! I cannot leave father as he will insist! I cannot!"

And then so sharp a heart pang came in answer she had to bite her lips.

For a very long half-hour more, she still sat there in silent communion with herself, her life — past, present, and probable future. She was barely conscious of the clock's solemn tick, imagined she heard the low wave-wash on the lonely shore, and saw the white and brown rows of serrated stones on the hillside above the village. Life had come to a parting of the ways for her: one pointing to love and duty to her father, the other into an unknown realm with an almost soul-stranger.

"No, no, no, I cannot," she said at last, rising to extinguish the light and retire, "and I shall not leave father!"

CHAPTER XXXIX

THERE are some days in good old New England that seem like a benediction, and such a one now ushered in Thanksgiving to Oakdale. The distant sea undulating beneath a red sun was without a ripple, the sky a dome of ambient haze, the air soft and balmy, the hillsides still glowing with faint shades of scarlet here and there amid the brown, and the vista of valley opening to the sea, still green. The church bells, as always here on that day, called the faithful once more, and Hazel with them, to sing again a song of joy and thankfulness; while over at the camp, Stacy's men were enjoying what to them was a glorious and satisfying day of rest and sports, with a dinner of roast turkeys, geese, and ducks as extra treat provided by him. He also, quite content with himself and all else, the progress of his work, and his wooing of Hazel, more especially, walked home with her from church as usual, then partook of a most excellent dinner provided by Aunt Sally and served by Hazel, also seasoned by the flavor of Uncle Asa's wit and humor. Stories were told by

both himself and that genial optimist, including what he never tired of (or any of the party either), his experience in the sleeping car with snakes as a side feature, and how scared the porter was! And after that, when the sun was well down, Stacy made a suggestion to Hazel.

"Let's walk up to the camp, little girl" (for so he occasionally addressed her now) "and see how my men are getting on and what they are doing." And she, half-conscious that this meant something more, took a light wrap, put on her red mobcap, and away they went up the hill and along the velvety path through the pines to the camp. They did not go close to it, either, just climbed a brown bush-covered hillock, to reconnoiter it from ambush, see the men — most of them in lazy abandon, and grouped around four who were pitching quoits, and then returned along the same path to the big pine where Stacy had first seen Hazel and the top of her home roof.

"Let us sit here a few moments," he said, "and watch the sunset. I feel like it, too," he added, half sadly, now spreading his top coat he had carried on his arm for her to sit upon, "feel the sunset mood, as I always do at the end of a Thanksgiving day."

"But why?" she queried, first glancing at him,

now seated beside her, then away to where his eyes were upon the red ball of fire close to the distant hilltop. "Hasn't the day been a pleasant one?"

"As much so as kind friends could make it," he returned briskly; "delightful, in fact, for I've had you for company. Only it is as always to me now, a day of bygones. Of memories of boyhood and my own home and Thanksgivings there. And the minor chord is the stern fact that all who made those days red-letter ones, are only memories now. Pictures on the walls of my room. Scenes upon the tablets of memory. It's the common fate of us all, and best kept out of mind. Pardon my mention of it.

"Do you know, Hazel," he continued hurriedly, as if wishing to force this retrospective chord out of her mind, "the only consolation a sunset has is the expectation that the sun will rise again. Again, I think, and do not wonder at it, how many millions were sun-worshippers once. I am myself, in a way, for it is the actual or only visible origin of all life on this planet. We believe in God or the Father of us all, and rightly, but the sun is the tangible means, after all."

"Yes, of bodily life, animal or vegetable," she rejoined earnestly, "but not of soul life — moods, emotions, feelings, ambitions — they must come

from some other source, I am sure. Aren't you?"

"Oh, not so sure as I wish I were," he returned, shaking his head, "for therein lies all faith in or hope of a future life, and while I hope for it, like all humanity, I wish I were more sure of it, however. Don't you?"

"To be candid, yes; only I have an implicit faith, and would hate to have it shaken by contrary proof. That must always be a matter of faith. It's our soul's only bulwark.

"I always lose a little faith when the end of autumn, with its death of plant-life comes," she added, sighing. "That forces the conviction of how short our lives are, and how soon I shall come to what you have to-day — the living over of bygones and pictures on the walls. I've only father, anyway."

And just then, Stacy, catching the minor chord of her mood and its kinship with his own, turned and scanned her face in profile. He noted the sad little droop to her lips, and how like Evangeline's face in expression her own was, and his heart gave a leap. If ever she was or would be in occult sympathy with him, it was now!

"Hazel," he said, suddenly reaching and clasping one of her hands, "life is short, hope is elusive; I

want you to inspire mine now and for all time! Oh, I want you for my very own!"

One instant's flash of her eyes meeting his came; a look that bared her very soul in the sunset glow; the next she drew her hand from his and both went to her face.

"Oh, no, no"— chokingly and quivering —"it must not be! I cannot leave father!"

"But you can promise — sometime," pleaded Stacy desperately. "I want you so much I will wait a lifetime! My God, I can't give you up!"

For one long moment she sat, still trembling, then turned her eyes to him, a vision of heaven.

"I cannot say no — always," she whispered brokenly, "but you must wait — you know — why."

And then, despite her brief struggle, he gathered her to his heart and their lips met.

Oh, wondrous illusion! Oh, blessed moment! Oh, divine thrill! Oh, sublime union of soul and impulse to which all else subserves and joins heaven and earth, soul and body, life and death, time and eternity, as naught else can or should! It comes but once with perfect power through all life's span, a soul-absorbing, death-defying, God-uniting instant of supreme ecstasy!

And so it came to these two, created to mate, perhaps, upon some other shore of time, some other realm where the Supreme Architect of the Universe said, "Go forth, you two; become as one, and create My world anew!"

It was hours later — how passed needs no description — when Hazel found her father asleep in his armchair beside the dying embers of the sitting-room fire.

"Why, girlie," he exclaimed, wakened now by a little arm enclosing his neck and a tear-moist face pressed to his, "what's happened to ye?"

"What I meant never should," she whispered, creeping into his lap and kissing him. "And I — I feel mean and happy both! But he is willing to wait and" — showering kisses upon his face — "I couldn't say 'no,' father."

"Wal, God bless ye, girlie, both on ye," now understanding her naïve confession as only he could and clasping her close.

For a long five minutes he held her thus, she who was more than life to him, then he spoke again.

"I knowed 'twould come, 'n' it's best so," he said softly, "'n' now I shall feel ye're to be keered fer allus ez a woman needs. O' course we got to part, I know that, too," he added a moment later, "'n' that's best so, likewise. Ye must be his'n, then

— everyways — not mine no more. But we'll hev quite a spell together yet, girlie," more cheerfully, " lots o' weeks 'n' months, mebbe, 'n' we're goin' to make the most on 'em, too! We be! Now go to bed 'n' dream o' settin' in a medder 'n' hearin' the birds singin' all around, ez ye ought to!"

Then he arose, lifting her to his heart, kissed her, plumped her on her feet, and then with a whispered " Good night, Poppy dear," she left him.

" It's best so, best so," he said to himself after listening to the last pat of her feet on the stairs, then pushing the smouldering embers together. " But it's goin' to be a cuttin' o' my heart out, jist the same."

CHAPTER XL

WHILE this Thanksgiving Day became red-letter one in Stacy's life-calend and the beginning of the most alluri and poetically beautiful illusion that comes to m Oakdale continued on the even tenor of its w without a ripple. The only disturbing factor them was the progress of this new enterprise was engaged upon, and its final result upon t town. This naturally elicited various opinions; few contending that it would prove an injury bringing in an alien population of foreign habi customs, and religion, and eventually destroy th peaceful life and serenity, while others, and t majority, felt confident that it would result in la ing benefit. In the meantime, Stacy, oblivious all public opinion and enwrapped in the building a new air castle with Hazel as its queen and m tress, was, as Uncle Asa would put it, " sawin' wo all the time."

He built an addition to his rude dining-room his men to occupy during the coming cold weath a portable sawmill was added to his outfit, and

soon as the swamp froze sufficiently, and snow came, he began hauling out all available and valuable timber. More life and more visitors came to the town, Bascom's store was the scene of greater activity and divided honors with Sam's hotel as evening loafing place for the Old Guard and general news agency for Oakdale. A few more traveling men, scenting business from afar, and in advance of it, as always, made that town an objective point, heard what was in prospect, and spread the tidings broadcast. In fact, and as invariably happens, these emissaries of trade and progress, first to locate a good hotel or customer, were also first to inform the outer world that Oakdale had woke up from its lethargy, that an enterprising firm was erecting a big dam to supply it with power, that new industries were soon to locate there, factories to be built and new dwellings, a harbor was to be created, and a trolley line to connect it with Barre soon to be established. Thus were made known all the details of Stacy's original air castle, soon to eventuate and become facts.

Hazel's future also became assured in the minds of all, for a diamond solitaire flashing from her left hand the next Sunday after Thanksgiving told her love story and its outcome as naught else could. Congratulations and cordial good wishes came to

her in abundance, for she was well beloved by a
and the chorus of "I told you so's," and "I kn
it would happen," spread apace. She and Sta
now known to be engaged, became the cynosure
all eyes each Sunday, and also, the target of a f
mildly envious glances from young and lonely mai
as well.

But the one whose life was to be most ups
whose future was to become barren, cheerless, u
loved, lonely and desolate, yet who would nev
complain or hint it ever, was Uncle Asa himse
"I want ye to gin up the school now, girlie,"
said to her the next day after Hazel had made h
half-pathetic confession, "'n' for two reaso
Fust, he is perty high strung 'n' won't jist reli
havin' the gal he's cal'latin' to marry walkin' thr
miles a day to arn a matter o' forty dollars a mon
'n' I don't want it either. Then ag'in, ye must l
gin thinkin' how he's goin' to think 'n' feel on
that consarns ye both from now on. In a way, ye
two hev become ez one, which is nat'ral, 'n' ye mu
figger that way in all ye feel 'n' do. Thar's al
'nother reason with me. He'll want ye to set t
day 'long next May or June; it's the marryin' tim
'n' it's jist ez well ye do. I shall hate to lose y
nobody knows how much, nor never will, but th
ain't nothin' gained by markin' time too long; j

long 'nuff to git a good ready, then go ahead in the march o' life 'n' pursuit o' happiness. Now this bein' the case, ez 'twill be, all I kin hev o' you is 'bout six months more, 'n' not many evenin's o' them either. But what time thar is, I want, every wakin' minute on't, 'n' when ye go, I'm goin' to jist grin 'n' bear it, thinkin' it's fer the best, 'n' yew're happy."

Of course Hazel assured him that she had no intention of deserting him in six months or six years even! That while she had said "yes" to Stacy's proposal, it was with a "sometime" and "long-way-off" proviso, and then only in her own good time, will, and pleasure.

"I have said I never intended to leave you, father, and I meant it," she assured him in conclusion, "and you know why I feel so. I presume I can be happy with Stacy, but you are still first in my feelings, and he can wait. It won't hurt him, either, and it's better he should do so, and learn all my faults before we take the fatal step; also give me time to learn his, for I am not sure he is quite perfect yet. You once said one person needed to winter and summer another to know him. Now I am going to heed your advice and winter and summer Stacy may be two or three times before I give myself to him for good."

"That's good sense, girlie," her father respond
smiling at her benignly and in wise manner, "I
'twon't work out the way ye figger. Ye may thi
ye see faults in him now; they won't seem so art
a month or two o' courtin', cause that's a part
Natur' 'n' the laws o' love. If he's fit to be yew
'n' yew his, ye'll both feel more sure on't day
day, and perty fast, too, or ye'd better not hitch
at all. I cal'late, too, ye'd do the same if ye wa'
fitted fer one 'nother. It's a kind o' head-'n'-hea
crazy spell, this fallin' in love is, 'n' ez fer see
faults while it lasts, ye won't and can't. Ye've g
to jist shut your eyes, go it blind, 'n' say, 'Hope
God it'll pan out all right.' It may, 'n' it may n
that's the luck o' life, but yew can't, 'n' no gal ev
did see any serious faults in a man arter she'd sa
'yes' to him. I think yew two'll pan out all rig
'n' be happy. If I hadn't, I'd never took ye bo
down to the shore that fust day 'n' gin ye the chan
o' meetin' ez I did. The fact is, I got a line
him the day I took him fishin' fust, I've kep' wat
o' him since, clusser'n you hev, knowin' what w
brewin', 'n' now, not bein' in love with him mysel
I kin see him better'n yew kin."

What her father wished and believed was la
with Hazel, and while conscious that this new a

sweet illusion would, or might blind her to Stacy's faults, she was sure that her father saw him as he was and trusted him accordingly. Beyond that or beneath it, lay the stronger tie of filial affection that made her feel this new bond to be secondary, and her father first in any and all matters pertaining to his happiness. When Stacy came, as he now did almost every evening, she would permit only a seldom all-by-themselves one for him, but her father must share it in his easy chair by the fire; and while, like all lovers, they now and then secured a brief privacy, it was short and, of course — sweet. In fact, as may be inferred from Hazel's make-up and mental scope, the soft nothings and cozy-corner caressings of average lovers were not for her. In this connection she now recalled an observation her father had once made years before to a nephew about to be married.

"Go a leetle slow, my boy, a leetle slow in this ere love business," he had said to him then, "'n' don't be wantin' to kiss her all the time, fust go off. Jist rec'lect ye've got a good many years on't ahead, 'n' ye kin kiss her when ye want to, 'n' when ye don't want to!"

With Hazel, and in line with her valuation of herself and her readiness for becoming bored, she

did not intend to permit any "not wanted" kisses from Stacy, or allow the Ogre of Satiety to enter their garden.

In deference to her father's wishes, she gave up her school at close of the fall term soon after Thanksgiving, and now with a few more late Indian Summer days fortunately vouchsafed them, she and her father began to make the most of them. Of course there were trips to the shore where she, well wrapped, kept him company, and to watch him pull his lobster pots was one pleasure. They dug clams, cooked cozy little dinners of sea food and ate them there as they had done countless times since her childhood, and on the same oft-used table, or if too cold, in the ancient fish house. They took long strolls on the beach, hand in hand, watching the sea gulls, the incoming waves, and finding queer bits of wreckage and the floatsam and jetsam of the sea cast up by them. They gathered quantities of shells, curiously worn and polished stones, and sailors' money purses, like two children, and leaving them in the fish house for a future use they both understood intuitively but never mentioned; and one day, when a half-gale forbade any pulling of pots, they devoted the most of their time to picking up driftwood and keeping a fire going within a wind-sheltered nook amid the sand dunes. To this

nook, also, Uncle Asa brought his few cooking utensils and boards from the table, and after making ready to cook a dinner, left Hazel here to watch the fire while he secured a mess of clams near the borders of the upshooting rush of monster billows. In this "wind-loved coign," as Hazel named it, he, a little later, steamed his catch of clams, broiled a couple of lobsters taken from his car inside of the sandspit, made a pot of coffee, and here, thus protected and kept warm, not ten rods from the white-crested breakers booming and crashing on the shore, they ate what was their last dinner beside the ocean. A few days later, and so cold that her father would not bring Hazel, he came down, took up his pots and bait net, drew his lobster car ashore and took out the few left in it, also stored and packed all his belongings in or near the fish house. Then, and so like a lover was he towards his well-beloved girlie, he gathered driftwood, built a fire within the wind-protected nook and cooked and ate his dinner here — all alone.

"I s'pose I've got to git used to it," he now said to himself, reflectively, and freshening the fire after the meal while he smoked, "but it's goin' to come hard, mighty hard! Curis, curis, how our feelin's is all thar is to livin' an' doin' all the time, 'n' all fer somebody else? Fust, it was her mother, then

Hazel, 'n' now — wal, now God only knows how I'm goin' to git along 'n' stand it, 'n' He won't tell! Nothin' ahead fer me but a six-foot hole, 'n' soon, too, mebbe the sooner the better! Wal, it's all fer the best 'n' her, all fer the best, but it's hard!"

Then this true philosopher who had always lived for others, tried to see the silver lining and hear larks in the sky, and was now ready to face an unloved old age and grim death, believing that all was for the best, added more fuel to the fire, filled and lit his pipe anew, and sat and watched the flames a little longer in solitude. Later, he took a long look around this dear, loved spot, the miles of lonely shore, the sand dunes rising back of it, the clump of almost leafless scrub oaks where his table stood, the blackened fireplace stones and fish house, and said, "Good-bye, old spot, till spring comes," then rowed up the winding creek, feeling that he had bade adieu to the only friend of his few remaining years.

Winter and snow came next to Oakdale, and a shut-in life for Uncle Asa, with chores and wood-chopping his only diversion, except the always too-short evenings while Hazel played or sang, or else used all her arts to draw him into conversation with Stacy and herself. He made occasional journeys to the dam site, however, to visit with Stacy, watch its growing progress in spite of snow and winter

cold, hear the ring of axes far away in the swamp and the crash of falling trees again, or the newer chirr and whirr of the movable sawmill, now reducing logs to boards and beams for the power house. And here, one day, he asked his first favor from Stacy.

"I'm goin' to build me a shack down by the shore in the spring," he said to him then, "jist a two-room one in the pocket whar we pitched our tents last fall. Not much o' one, either, only big enough fer me to live in in summer, some day. I'd like a fireplace in it, too — a fire's a heap o' company evenin's — 'n' jist a bit o' piazza in front. Ef you'll kinder plan it 'bout right, git out the stuff this winter, 'n' haul that 'n' stone enough to the shore, I'll pay the bill, 'n' do the rest myself when spring comes."

"I will," returned Stacy briskly, "and at no cost to you. Only I want to put up a larger one than you say — three rooms in it — so we can all go there sometimes and have a lot of comfort, as I know we can."

And so, knowing Uncle Asa's plans and intentions as he now did — in fact, they had already been discussed by Hazel and himself — Stacy set about this labor of love. He detailed a competent man to draw plans and specifications, the frame and boards

were soon sawed, and these with stone for underpinning and fireplace were next hauled to the shore. More than that, and meaning to surprise Uncle Asa, he took workmen there as soon as the first spring days came, in a quiet manner, and within a month, a pretty little three-room cottage with an ell for cook-room, a rain-water tank on top of that, with piazza on three sides, stood where they had once camped. Hazel was also informed of the intended surprise; she and Stacy made several trips to Barre, and by the time the maples enclosing her home were growing green, the summer cottage that love had built for Uncle Asa to enjoy his shore life in was all ready for him. Hazel's thoughts had gone beyond her own new illusion and plans; and every comfort and convenience possible for her father to use or enjoy here was added by her, even to a large photograph of herself framed and hung over the mantel above the fireplace. Then, as if to add the one final touch most suggestive of herself, she explained what she wanted to Stacy: a rod-square pit was dug in the sand in front of the cottage and filled with loam, a low wall of stones built around it, and here she planted or set out all the flowers it would hold.

To her, also, knowing what was in store for her

father's feelings, this last act seemed akin to the selection of a burial plot for him.

To acquaint him with her own future plans, was also perhaps the hardest task she felt called upon to perform. So much so, that she postponed it for weeks after they were agreed upon between herself and Stacy, and the date for their wedding named by her. But it must be done, and one evening, the first one warm enough to leave doors and windows open, and when the frogs were peeping and piping their joy over returning spring, she went to her father after Stacy had left her and made her confession.

"Father," she whispered, creeping into his lap where he sat all alone in the kitchen and enclosing his neck with one arm, "we — we are to be married in May after the dam is done, and I — he wants me to live in Albion, he says. Oh, I hate to tell you, father."

"O' course, girlie, o' course," he returned with well-assumed cheerfulness. "I s'pected that, 'n' it's all right so long's yew're happy." Then, as if this marked the beginning of the end, he clasped her with one arm and began stroking her face and hair.

"We have planned a little surprise for you, poppy

dear," she continued pleadingly, as if to soften the blow, "just the prettiest and coziest cottage by the sea, and all done now! But you must promise not to go there till we—we go away. Then you—may be you won't miss me quite so much after that!"

It was all said, the blow given, and no more words needed between these two who had been one in feeling so many years. Only a little closer clasp came from him, while both her arms were around his neck now, with a warm flushed face and tear-wet eyes against his wrinkled cheek.

For a long half-hour after Hazel left him, he still sat in his chair living over bygones, unconscious even of the tall clock's solemn tick, then arose and went outside to look around, as he often had before retiring on summer nights. The brook beside the lane he now followed down laughed and chattered as usual, but he heard it not. A half-moon low in the west outlined the winding creek, the vista of broad meadow, and cast a silver sheen upon the distant ocean, but he saw it not. To the right lay the village, and above it that more suggestive one with its serried rows of white and brown stones. Only this caught and held his eyes with consciousness of its nearness in his life's journey, and that Hazel was his no more in love and spirit; that another

soul had mated with hers and the parting of their ways was at hand.

"It's got to come, got to come, 'n' the last o' askin'," he said to himself resolutely now, his eyes still upon the rows of stones, "but she mustn't know how hard 'tis! How hard 'tis!"

Once more he glanced up at the starry sky, the moon's bright crescent, then down to the bordering ocean with its silvered path. This he now scanned steadily for a long time, as if it promised the path into another life and another world, then sighed and turned away.

"No, she mustn't know it, never, never!" he said to himself once more, then faced about. And still unconscious of the night's charm, the rifts of moonlight glinting through the half-leaved maples, or the brook's low lullaby, he walked with bowed head up the lane and entered the silent house.

CHAPTER XLI

WITH some good luck and more push, Stacy was enabled to place the last cap stone of his dam in position a week ahead of the date he had set for the final lowering of its gate. Then came the grand May-day bonfire, or a hundred of them, scattered over the swamp area, with Uncle Asa, Hazel, Sam, and the Old Guard watching it from a hilltop, and that night the men were paid off and given a concluding banquet. They in turn gave a sort of medley concert of songs and dancing, with half the townsfolk for audience that evening, and next day all but a dozen of the most skilled workmen departed.

And so closed the working part of transforming Bear Hole Swamp into a storage reservoir whose ultimate possibility was the completion of Stacy's air-castle city.

The power house was yet to be built by the men he had retained for that purpose, and after that a cable must be laid to transmit its electric results over the hills and through the woods to Barre. To entertain all Oakdale with an old-fashioned clam-

bake came next, and for this Stacy now prepared by detailing his retained men to dig a dozen barrels of clams, and ordering an ample supply of lobsters, sweet potatoes, and other necessaries sent over from Barre. Uncle Asa, of course, superintended this important event; Bert, the faithful Ike, and Stacy's aunt came up from Albion the day previous to it; Hazel, with a bevy of her girl friends around her, broke a bottle of wine over the big flower-decked gate as it was lowered into place, and christened the dam "Our New City." The clambake, served on tables under the pine trees just below, came next, around which nearly all Oakdale gathered. Stacy made a little speech of felicitation, and this concluded the first part of an episode that had stirred the hamlet as naught ever had before, and was still likely to continue its piquant interest. Hazel, with the tactful consideration that was hers, insisted that Stacy's aunt accept the hospitality of her home, and that evening Colby proffered a few terse congratulations to Stacy at the hotel, that may well be quoted.

"I am fully satisfied with what you have done, my boy," he said to him, smilingly, and in his usual direct way. "You have chosen well and built well so far as the dam goes, and more so in the girl. I am not surprised you fell in love with her and

forgot Albion for eight months, as you have. I should, had I been your age and fancy free, for she is a prize-winner among girls and well worth roses at any price. Ike can manage matters here while you are off honeymooning, in fact, there is no need of your staying here after your wedding. Our business needs you in Albion."

And so Fate and cold business calculation brought about what Uncle Asa knew at heart was in store for him — a lone and cheerless old age.

A week later, it was consummated, when all feminine Oakdale and many of the masculine element crowded its principal church to witness that event. Of course, Hazel was a beautiful bride — all brides are, a little way off — but she was exquisite, even close at hand, and Stacy had ample reason to feel proud that he could now call so sweet, so wise, and so tactful a maid his own, for weal or woe, for joy or sorrow, " until death do you part," as the clergyman said in conclusion.

A little spread was served at her home to those nearest and dearest to both, during which Uncle Asa tried his best to be optimistic, cheerful, and humorous, and to add all possible good cheer. It was forced, however, as Hazel knew full well, for she could read his heart as none else could.

" I want ye to stop 'n' say good-bye to me, girlie,

under the apple tree where we counted the money," he whispered to her near the conclusion of these festivities. "I can't do it here 'thout givin' way. Jist drive by a couple o' rods, 'n' come to me fer the last of askin'. Yew understand."

Then he bit his lips and turned away. And only supreme will power kept Hazel from bursting into tears there and then.

She planned the parting moment, also, with her usual tact, even requesting Stacy to tell the driver just where to halt their carriage and not look around to witness her leave-taking from her father.

It came about, also, as both wished, and a half-hour later Uncle Asa in ambush back of a cluster of green-leaved bushes beneath the apple tree — once the scene of another touch of pathos — saw their carriage halt just beyond and Hazel leap out.

And the next instant she was in his arms and sobbing!

"Don't take on so, girlie, don't, fer God's sake," he whispered chokingly and with a last desperate effort to hide his feelings. "Ye're goin' to be happy 'n' I want ye to start off smilin'! I don't want ye 'round no more either, I tell ye! I — I —" Then the rush of feeling conquered all will power and shook his great frame with mighty force.

"Don't think o' me, 'n' don't miss me, my God's

blessin'," he whispered, now kissing her up
face and clasping her closer still.

One long moment she sobbed in his arms, u
to speak, then he pushed her from him.

"Now go," he said firmly, "'n' God bles
God bless ye allus!"

And so they parted.

CHAPTER XLII

IT was almost sunset that May day when Uncle Asa once more pulled his old brown dory alongside the little wharf in the cove, stepped ashore, made it fast, crossed the ridge of sand, and looked over the wide ocean like one in a trance. At his feet, almost, the incoming swells curled over and crashed in low, booming monotone, and upshot of yeasty foam. To the left, where an out-jutting curve of pebbles met them, came a clicking, as of dry bones, after each receding wave. To the right, and for miles away, the same persistent, sullen menace of defiant sound, along the white-fringed, lone, and lonely shore. In front, and bordered by the purple shadow of coming night, lay the broad ocean, white-crested, dim, mysterious, and sublime.

For a long moment he stood there, hearing only that clicking rattle and sullen rumble, and knowing that desolation and utter loneliness was his to face. Then he turned and saw the red-roofed cottage Love had built for him, peering out from its coign between the sand dunes.

And just now it seemed like a mausoleum awaiting his final occupancy!

He walked slowly towards it, grimly conscious that it was almost that, after all, and his plan to find peace and content here, as hopeless.

And then Hazel's heart and soul spoke to him! First, in the little circle of flowers, now abloom in front, next, in the two willow rockers side by side on the cottage piazza, and more lovingly, in the cozily furnished sitting-room he now entered. An open fireplace, with white birch wood ready to light, smiled at him from one side. Above that — and next noticed — was a large framed photograph of herself, and beside the fireplace a waiting easy chair. A jar of tobacco stood on the mantel, two bronze figures — a fisherman in sou'-wester and girl in sun hat with a basket of flowers on her arm — flanked that, and a pipe rack with a medley of pipes filled the space between picture and mantel. In one corner of the room, also, and as if it meant to recall Hazel's last visit here with him, stood a what-not, upon which were all the shells and sea-curios they had gathered then. A monster bunch of lilacs and roses upon a center-table perfumed the room and proved her presence there that day. Beside this lay her auto-harp and a pile of books, while a rattan

sofa, more chairs, lace curtains, and marine pictures on the walls completed the room's furnishings.

And yet, while love and money had been lavished here without stint, it still seemed to him like a furnished tomb!

"God bless ye, girlie, God bless ye!" he exclaimed, after his look around and eyes upon her smiling face. "Ye've done all ye could, all ye could, but it's you I need most." Then and dazed still by his own hopeless mood, he drew the portieres aside and entered the next room.

He found a table set for three with snowy napery, another vase of flowers, and sideboard loaded with more dishes and glassware. And opening into this, a sleeping room with white iron bed, bay window, straw matting, and white mull enclosing the dressing-case mirror. To the rear of this dainty dining-room, was the kitchen, with stove, ice-chest, white sink, curtained shelves and box of wood in one corner. And, as if his plan to come here and fight his heartache out alone had been understood by Hazel, he found ice, meat, milk, butter, and two baskets of strawberries in the ice-chest, and bread, cake, and pies on the curtained shelves! All that was lacking was a woman's hand and care to cook and serve a meal, and her face and smile to add its

welcome. But the only one that could, had gone out of his life for all time! Was only a memory now! A picture on the wall!

To cook or eat now he could not, was not even conscious of hunger! On the morrow he might be, for body will in time dominate all heart or soul, all joy or sorrow! But not yet. And so with bowed head, and all that had been done for him only adding to his desolation, he returned to the sitting-room and Hazel's pictured face.

And now, a new pathos was adding to those soulful eyes by the sunset glow, and a more tender and pitying smile to her lips. It was as if she were looking down upon him from a world he could not enter. A farewell from somewhere on the shores of time where light and life and love still ruled, while he was entering the shadows of oblivion. Conscious only of this, that but a few more years of heart-hunger with naught to hope for awaited him, then the serrated village on the hillside, he sat down and bowed his face within his hands.

"It's hard to bear, harder'n I s'posed," he said to himself now with grim resolution, "but I've got to! Got to do it, that's all! She 's happy anyhow, that's some comfort!"

For a long time he sat there in the silent, darkening room, eyes closed, face bowed upon his hands,

and unconscious of all else except his own hopeless desolation. All his life next passed in review. His first boyish illusions and ambitions, the continued living in to-morrow, with brighter and better days beyond, the fair girl — Hazel's counterpart — that had entered his life midway of its course, Hazel's coming, the few and best of all years after that, then the break that seemed like the sun's blotting out, with only Hazel left. How she had grown into his life like a benediction year by year, the countless times they had been as two children on this very shore, and finally the coming of this soul-mate he had hoped would care for and protect her future. That had come about as he wished, but it meant more to him than he ever dreamed, a severance more hopeless. All this he lived over in the silent room with only the waves' solemn monotone echoing his saddened thoughts.

Then he looked up!

The room was quite dark now, Hazel's face had vanished, and only starlight outlined the nearest window.

It seemed like the open portal of a tomb to him!

And now the ocean's voice grew louder and more varied. A child's laughter, a woman's sob, a murmur of tones, like an auto-harp, and woven into all the faint rattle and click of those pebbles! And

then came a hollow sound resolving itself into "Gone-away! Gone-away! Gone-away!" far down the shore.

Footsteps crept around on the piazza! A whisper came from the inner rooms! Hazel's voice reaching him from afar, from another world may be!

And hearing this, once more he raised his eyes to that pictured face above him, but vainly, for the pall of darkness hid even its frame!

Then, without hope, alone in the gloom quivering with that measured requiem of the waves, he bowed his head, a great sob burst from his heart and tears came.

And just then, like a spirit's presence, Hazel's arms were clasping his neck and her face pressed to his!

"Why must we love, 'n' suffer fer it? My God, why must we?" he whispered to her.

But only the ocean answered.

THE END

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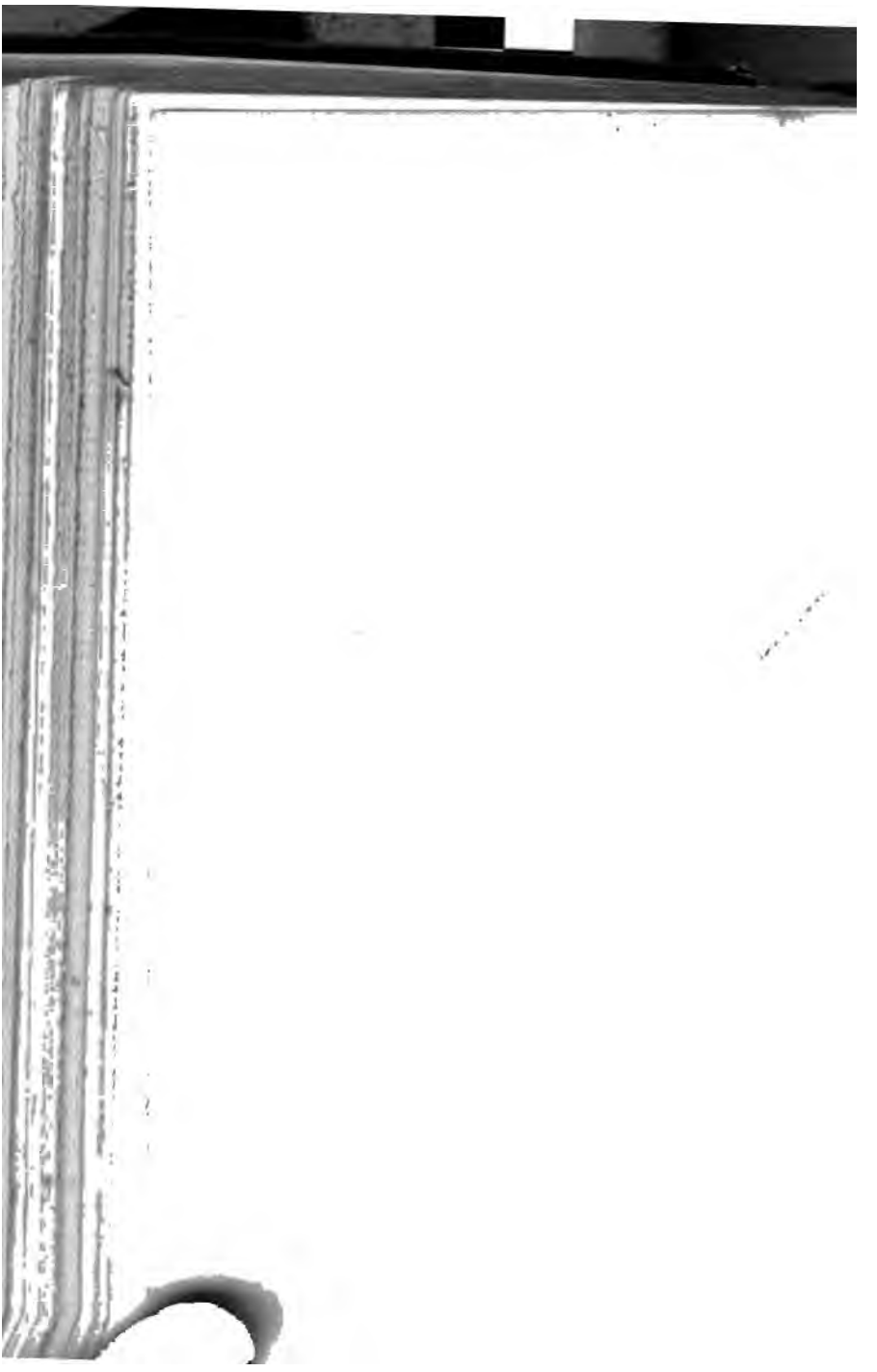
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